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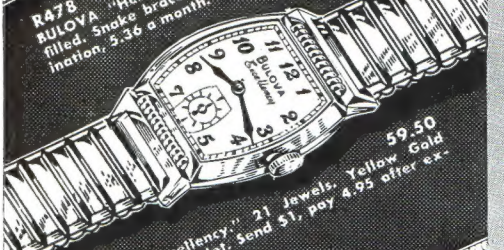

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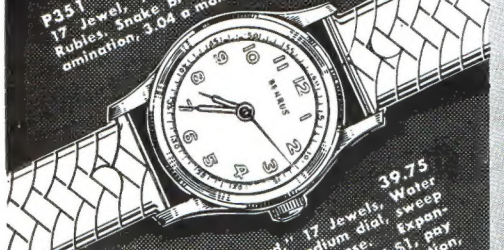

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Three men rode that gun-damned drive . . . and one swore to reach trail's end—alone!

2. **HELL CROWDS MY GUNS**.....*Giff Cheshire* 54
It takes a man longer to learn to die—than to learn to kill!

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He had one last bullet to send one man to hell—and bring another back!

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"Welcome to backshoot range—where the quick become dead right sudden!"

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"We ride by day, kill by night, and sleep only once—six feet under!"

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Each old soldier needs one night—when dead comrades ride to his bidding!

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The owlhooters wanted a lawman, the tinstars wanted a lobo—and Ben could fill either grave!

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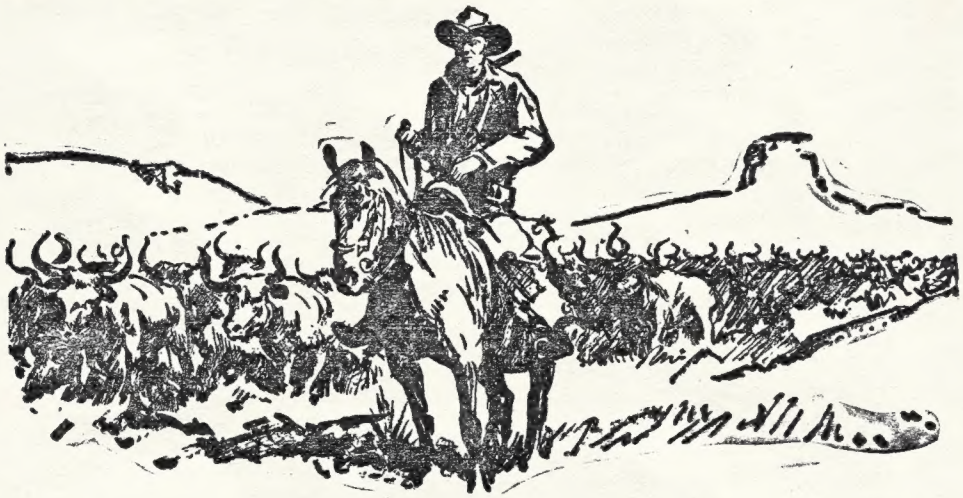

THE pleasantest part of the trail hand's day comes at the end of it. With the herd bedded down easy and the night guard's singing sounding peaceful in the distance, he can swing out of the saddle, tired from his day's work, to relax and talk things over.

That's why we enjoy these sessions on the trail with you, where we can get together to hash over matters Western, and where each man can have his say and share his stories and opinions with others.

We hope that our top hand for this issue, T. T. Flynn's *Bullets To The Pecos,* was as much to your liking as it was to ours, and we think you'll agree by now that we didn't give you a bum steer on Ralph Bennitt's *Vengeance Valley.* How about it?

The letter bonanza for our tale-swapping department continues to roll in, so, without further ado, here it is:

Dear Editor:

The best mousetrap in the world once caused a mob of Tennesseans to beat a path to the door of the gent who marketed it—with the main idea of lynching him.

About a half century ago, Memphis was invaded by a horde of rats which all but ruined it—so plentiful and hungry were the rodents that they not only attacked very young children in their homes, but occasionally set upon adults in the streets. When things were at their roughest, an Arkansas man mail-order-advertised a guaranteed trap for a dollar.

He was flooded with orders—and for each dollar sent to Memphis a tough, underfed alleycat. People in Memphis were in no mood to see any humor in the deal and riots ensued.

Before the crowds got hold of their victim, however—the Arkansas cats slaughtered the Tennessee rats.

At that, the Tennesseans got a bargain. During the days of the forty-niners in San Francisco, rat-hungry cats brought up to $20 each!

John Morrow
Memphis, Tennessee

And from starving cats to starving actors is really not much of a jump, at least not the way they used to do things in Deadwood, that hell-hungry town which is the source of so many stories:

Gentlemen:

Out around Deadwood way they still tell of a roadshow that stopped briefly to offer its Shakespearean wares. Never noted for its intellectual attainments, the town was represented sparsely in the auditorium, but the few spectators did their best to hoot the cast off the stage.

The show's master of ceremonies made several ineffectual appeals to his listeners'

(Continued on page 8)

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who never thought they could!

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I've had my lessons just a week. I think your course is super. I was more thrilled than words can express when I found I could actually play America, The Merry Widow Waltz and others.
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*D. E. G., Wausau, Wisc.

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I am finding a new joy that I never experienced before, for I have always wanted to play, but had given up hope until I heard of your course.
*C. S. Lucien, Okla.

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I hesitated before sending for your course because of an earlier experience I had with a course by ear from another company. I am playing pieces now I never dreamed I would play after only two months.
*E. T. Prichard, Ala.

*Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by professional models.

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(Continued from page 6)

better nature, but the rioting continued.

He made one final appearance—this time with his entire cast behind him. He yelled, "Don't misunderstand me, folks—but if it comes to a showdown—" he pointed to the cast eloquently— "we outnumber you!"

The show went on.

Mrs. Mary Tulare
Albuquerque, N. M.

Speaking of shows, the new West isn't producing men less whang-leather tough than their fathers. This is suggested by the indestructible qualities exhibited by several top rodeo riders, troupers of today's plains. Dick Griffith, who some years ago held the world title in trick riding, in his early thirties could boast of both feet broken, both ankles broken, thigh, hip, back, shoulders and collarbone smashed. He kept right on riding—and winning top honors.

Bob Crosby, sometimes called the greatest of them all, at one time or another smashed nearly every bone in his body except his left leg and his spine, some of them so often that his insurance company notified him it would invalidate his policy if he were killed during certain rodeo activities.

Crosby's pet aversion, we hear, is beds. People die in 'em!

If you thought, as we did, that rustling was a thing of the past, then this letter will be news to you:

Dear Editor:

I've been a Western Fiction fan for many years, and I thought I knew all about rustling—until just recently, when I took a trip.

During the last decade or so, things are once more beginning to look lively out New Mexico way, where there's a chance a traveler may run across the following notice, nailed to a tree:

REWARD
For Cattle Thieves
Payment On Delivery
We Won't Have No Trial

Reason is, cattle rustling is more prevalent than it was in the old days when slow-elking was resorted to in most cases simply as a means of starting a herd. Today's rustlers market the stolen beef immediately, are enabled to do so by resorting to furniture vans for transportation. Hence, discovery of the rustlers is more difficult—by the time a rancher is aware of his loss, his beeves usually are already hanging, hideless, in some butcher shop. Some cow-thieves even butcher on the open range, bury the hide and carry the carcases away in refrigerated trucks!

Harold Risley
Gallup, New Mexico

At that rate, before you know it, they'll be selling you a bronc with radio and heater! Are there any pioneers in the house?

Dear Editor:

A monument to the westward march of civilization in the days when the West was a-building is the Bryan Mullanphy legacy, established in 1851 in St. Louis, to aid needy through-travelers, intent on settling in the wilderness. The fund, through lack of qualified applicants in recent decades, has been idle, collecting interest—and at last reports had a surplus of over a million dollars!

Edward Sensenderfer
Dearborn, Michigan

The next deals with a gent we never heard of till now.

Dear Editor:

The element of luck entered, probably as much as courage, into the building of this country. Timothy Dexter, as a legend, stands unique enough to be national property.

His saga starts when, as a poor laborer, he ranged the newly formed United States buying up continental currency with his life savings—at a time when people papered their walls with it and children used fortunes of it in their street games. Dexter naively believed Alexander Hamilton would honor the paper. He did and Dexter's fortune was made.

Completely gullible, he seems to have been an easy mark of the nearest con man. A tipster promptly parted him from some of his new assets by selling him the idea they needed coal at Newcastle. Dexter financed a shipload of coal to be delivered at once. His ship docked at Newcastle during a coal miners' strike and he made a mint!

Next somebody tipped him off that warming pans were greatly in demand among the natives in tropical Havana and Dexter reacted gratefully. His consignment of warming pans hit Havana just as the mo-

(Continued on page 129)

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BULLETS TO THE PECOS

By T. T. FLYNN

CHAPTER ONE

Watch Your Back Trail!

TROUBLE broke so fast there on the Jack-knife Flats, in South Texas, where the trail herd was making up, that Bob Kenny was dazedly slugging big Red Wallace with both fists, for his life perhaps, before he quite realized what was happening.

His gun had been deftly jerked from his holster as he turned away from bawling out Red Wallace for loafing on the job. He'd swung around fast and met the terrific smash of Red's big fist. Steve Creel and Bo Creel had just happened to

Kenny advanced on Red, firing as he came. . . .

Three men rode that gun-damned drive to the Pecos—one who packed lightning, one who killed with thunder—and one who swore to reach trail's end . . . alone!

be standing there between the branding fires. Or so it seemed. They hadn't been standing there a couple of minutes before. Neither had Blackie Fenner or Hi-Low Jack Bristol.

But there they were when the mule-kick punch on the side of his jaw drove Bob Kenny reeling into the Creel boys. He caught a confused glimpse of all four grouped up. Bo Creel's hand steadied him upright and shoved.

"Get the red-headed skunk!" Bo Creel's husky voice had urged in his ear.

And in the same instant, a second terrific blow had struck the back of Bob's head, under the wide, dusty hat brim. No fist that. Wood or metal had done it.

Bob Kenny was all but paralyzed. Knees buckling, he lurched back to meet big Red's rush. It was all confused, mixed up, whirling in front of his foggy eyes. Then Red Wallace, hatless now, gunbelt shucked aside, wide, muscular face stone-hard with purpose, jumped in close. Red's fist exploded from nowhere, and this time Bob Kenny spilled flat and sprawling.

He rolled by instinct, a great sickness in his belly and wild, helpless rage battling the fog in his head. The rage brought him up, dodging the furious kick of Red's high-heeled boot. Red had jumped in to stamp him. Red meant to finish him.

Bob Kenny came up staggering, lurching away, trying for extra seconds to get the fog out of his head, the drag out of his body. That tall, corded, solid body that had never failed him, until now.

Riders came galloping out of the dust pail. Other men were running close to watch, to hear the panting, scornful yell Red Wallace loosed, "Stand an' take your lickin', Kenny!"

A stumbling dodge eluded Red's rush. But it didn't help. The hard-baked alkali ground seemed to be weaving. Everything stayed blurred. Red was coming in again. Bob stood and slugged at him. It was like a bad dream. Movements slow and weak, he hit Red and it did no good. He drove a fist against the hard muscular face. Red Wallace walked right through the blow, smashing his right fist, his left, his right. . . .

Bob Kenny was reeling back again when he saw the colonel's big, jet-black horse rein up close from a full gallop. He saw the colonel's pinned-up, empty left sleeve, the trim and military set of the Colonel's shoulders, and the blazing disbelief on the thin, proud, imperious face. All that in a glance—and then Red's fist smashed it away into a dizzy haze. . . .

He rolled on the ground again, finished this time and he knew it. Red's stamping boot heel grazed the side of his head. Red meant to stamp him unconscious. Wasn't much he could do about that either, except put his arms up as a guard.

Red's boot toe got through with the next kick and split his cheek and drove his head over on the dirt and the day seemed to be darkening into night.

Colonel Stillman's shout of command cut through the heat and dust, "Hold that, Wallace!"

Red Wallace obeyed.

"Get Kenny on his feet!" The Colonel was not a big man, but his blazing, imperious pride was high and wide.

Bob Kenny was trying to crawl up. Steve Creel and Bo Creel grabbed his arms and hoisted him roughly upright. His loose knees would have dropped him if the Creels hadn't held him up. Blood spattered his arms and hands, and it was his blood, from his ripped cheek and pounded mouth. There wasn't much pain; only that feeling of being half-paralyzed in every inch of the corded, solid body which always had been lithe and quick.

The Colonel stayed there, fifty yards away, on his big black horse. His raspy voice carried quickly enough, angry, scornful. "Kenny! You got whipped! You're not the man to trail my cattle to Colorado! Wallace gets your job! Can't

even use you as a hand. It would make trouble along the trail. You've got a week's pay coming. Stop by the house and get it on your way out."

Bob Kenny spat red. "Damn your pay, Colonel!" he gasped, but the Colonel was already wheeling his horse away. The Creel boys let go, Bob staggered and almost fell down again.

Red Wallace was grinning. "You two watch him pack an' line out. I'll be busy. If he makes a move with that gun, shoot the son. He got licked, but it'll eat at him."

A man's world could crash like that. Men who had been friendly could cast side glances of pity. Men who'd resented him could grin with satisfaction. The Creel brothers, with their wide cheekbones and swart, dark skin, had that satisfied look as they loitered near the chuck wagon while Bob Kenny washed his head in a leather bucket of water and old Gus, the cook, who limped badly, gave him some stickum tape for his face.

"How'd you git that cut an' big bump on the backa your head?" old Gus demanded. He was leathery and wrinkled, with pale gray eyes, shaggy gray hair, hunched shoulders, a gimpy leg and one cheek always bulging with a big chew of black plug.

Bob gingerly touched the back of his head. He was steadying up a little. "Red must have stamped it," he said.

"Don't see how he done it! Woulda bet a year's pay he couldn't!" Gus snatched off his flour sack apron. "I got enough of a fool outfit run by a stiff-necked old sidewinder who still figgers he's chargin' into battle an' damn the men who ain't chargin' to suit him!"

"Climb down, Gus. The Colonel's all right. So's the 5X bunch."

"The hell it is! Not with that Red Wallace bossin' on the trail!"

"He'll let you alone. When the Colonel gets his 5X brand settled on that long grass up north, you'll be set right, Gus. It's fine country. The ranch buildings will be up before snow, and you'll be bedded purty for life."

"Who wants to bed down fer life?"

But Gus was wavering a little. A man all broken up inside, barely able to limp around his chuck wagon, wasn't one for the long trails any more. He couldn't even be sure of a cook's job all the time. "Where you goin'?" he asked.

"I'm not sure where I'm going. It'll be a far piece," Bob said.

"Don't want a old gimp like me along, huh?"

"I won't have you quittin' on my account. Take it bristlin' if you want to, you cantankerous, stiff-necked old hellion."

Bob said it grinning and got a glare back. Gus stamped to the back of his wagon and started rattling pans. Bob roped his own top horse out of the rope corral and switched saddles at the bed wagon.

HE LASHED his bedroll on another horse while the work of road-branding the last of the great herd went on in the heat and eddying dust. The last thing he did was fill a saddle canteen at the water barrel on the chuck wagon.

Old Gus limped over to him with a gunnysack. "Grub," Gus said. "Where you heading?"

"Send word to you when I get there."

The Creel brothers had stayed nearby and close together. Two stocky, flat-faced men who never talked much. The Colonel had hired them for the drive west and north. Bob had noted that the two men had a way of sauntering off when strangers appeared.

He stopped now beside his saddle horse and touched the swollen back of his head, and turned for a long slow scrutiny of the Creel brothers. One of them had slug-

ged him from behind. They'd been waiting, evidently, to do just that after Red Wallace started a fight. Everything planned neatly. The trick had worked; the trap had snapped—and Red Wallace was taking the Stillman 5X herd to Colorado.

The Creels drew closer together in a kind of stiff watchfulness, hands ready to snatch guns. They knew what he was thinking.

Bob Kenny smiled thinly and swung on the horse, and gathered up the pack horse rope. "So long, you two," he called. "Don't forget me."

Bo Creel gave a flat, unsmiling answer. "We'll look for you."

They stood watchfully as Kenny rode off. He guessed the two brothers were thinking the same thing he was. Somewhere they'd have a meeting, a settling. The Creels might even come after him today to have it over with.

He was probably alive because the Creels and Red Wallace had lacked a good excuse for a shooting. And a killing might not have put Wallace in as trail boss. Colonel Stillman wasn't one to hire cold-blooded killers.

Red Wallace had known what he was doing. So had the Creels. Everything planned, carried out neatly. But why?

In the south a fast riding figure topped a roll of the brush-dotted land, riding to cut him off. The distant rider became Carol Stillman, the Colonel's daughter, and Bob Kenny waited for her. He'd been glad Carol wasn't with her father to watch the beating he took. Now he could almost guess what Carol was coming to say.

Riding sidesaddle, Carol wheeled her blowing horse alongside and burst out heatedly, "Father told me! He was wrong, Bob! Wrong like he usually is when his temper takes hold!"

Bob Kenny differed calmly, "He was right. All the men saw me take a whipping. After that, I wasn't the one to give orders."

"Why not?" Carol demanded with the same heat.

"Every man who saw it would have it in his mind each time I bore down on him."

Carol was slim and dark, a lady to her fingertips, though with her father's fiery nature. But Carol could be level-headed where the Colonel was apt to explode in temper.

"You can whip that Red Wallace!" Carol burst out.

"I didn't," Kenny reminded dryly.

"I don't understand it." Carol was troubled. "The trail won't be the same with Wallace in your job," she said. Her forehead knit in thought. "Bob, if you'll stay another day, father might change his mind."

Kenny said, "No!" much shorter than he meant it to sound. "I wouldn't take a job that a woman had to beg for me," he added. "And I wouldn't have this job back if your father begged me."

"You hate him now, don't you, Bob?"

"No."

"You couldn't help it," Carol decided unhappily. "What are you going to do now?"

Kenny started to answer and shrugged instead.

Carol smoothed her skirt and held the horse in. For once, her face gave no hint of what she was thinking. She gathered the reins and said quietly, "Good luck, Bob."

"The same, Carol. We might meet in Colorado one of these days."

Carol nodded, but her manner suggested no belief that they would. She lifted a gloved hand and shook her horse into a high lope back toward the ranch.

Kenny rode on, looking soberly after the receding horse and rider until they were out of sight. He felt worse, and he felt better too, because Carol had made

the hurried ride out to talk with him.

The dropping sun was a blaze ahead when Kenny's frequent scrutiny of the backtrail was rewarded. A thin dust lifted back there and became another rider coming fast along his tracks.

Kenny dismounted, drank leisurely from the saddle canteen and built a cigarette. He pulled the carbine from the saddle scabbard and sat comfortably on the ground, waiting.

He recognized the reckless cant of the weathered old black hat when the rider was still distant and put the carbine back. Baldy Emerson saw him waiting on foot, slacked off the long run and came up at a blowing trot.

"Hell of a note!" Baldy called, and when he stepped down, Baldy's brown mustache had a bristling look. "Let a red-topped bag of wind whup you!" Baldy snorted.

He was a thick-torsoed man, bald and mustached, with squinting eyes. "We brought the last hosses from Hawk Creek past the ranch house an' heard the news from Miss Carol," said Baldy. He spat expressively and jerked a thumb at the blanket roll tied on his saddle. "I quit right there. I'll git my other stuff if I'm back that way. Where we heading?"

"Can't use you, Baldy."

"Who asked you to use me? I can ride along, can't I?" Baldy spat expressively. "I ain't takin' orders from Wallace."

"Want to help me, Baldy?"

"I'm here, ain't I?"

"Go back and hit the trail with the Colonel like you planned."

Baldy smoothed one side of his mustache. His squint deepened. "That help you any?"

"Might."

Baldy thought it over as he rolled a cigarette. "You got whupped. It's tracked

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all over your face. You got fired too."

Kenny smiled at the puzzled look on Baldy's face. "That's right."

"Somethin'," Baldy decided, "ain't right about it. I thought so when I first heard. Red Wallace is tough, but he ain't that good."

"Tackle him and see," Kenny chuckled, and then turned wry. "Baldy, this is just for you to see. Never mind talking about it later on."

Kenny pulled off his hat and turned the back of his head. "Red could claim his boot heel did that. But one of the Creels buffaloed me on the sly, right after the fight started. They were standing there waiting. Had it all planned, I think."

Baldy was scowling. "Damn them dirty two! They never acted that friendly to Wallace! Show your hand, Bob. What good does it do anyone if I make the drive with that bunch—an' you farther away every day?"

"It's a long trail to the Pecos and north, Baldy. The Colonel is pulling out of Texas for good. Taking everything. Making a new start."

"Everyone knows that."

"He's not a cattleman at heart," Bob mused. "His brother Tom ran the ranch until Tom died three years ago. The Colonel was the army man, the fighter."

Baldy snorted.

"But never a dirty fighter," Bob Kenny said. "The Colonel's kind rush out front with the flag and ride at the guns and never look back at who gets shot."

Baldy snorted again. "Injuns'll teach him not to gallop around in the open, wavin' a sword. He ain't learned what dirty fightin' can be."

"White men fight trickier and dirtier than Indians when they're minded." Bob Kenny was thoughtful. "The Colonel's driving through wild country. Dry and rough. Anything could happen."

"You tryin' to say something?" Baldy demanded.

"I'm not sure, Baldy. In Colyville, about six weeks ago, Doc Ring bought me a drink and offered me a job."

"The nerve of that tinhorn, duded-up, crooked cattle swapper!" said Baldy explosively. "If that peaked-lookin' little skunk had banked a dollar for every blotted brand an' rustled beef he's traded in, he'd own half the pesos in South Texas! It's only pure luck he ain't been hung or shot long ago! A job? Hell! Takes jail bait to ride for Doc Ring!"

"You're guessing about most of that," said Kenny. "Anyway, Doc Ring is heading north. Told me he'd be along with his drive most of the way, but he needed a good man he could trust to boss the drive. I told him I was taking the 5X drive to the Pecos and Colorado. He said he'd heard so, but if my plans changed, to ride over and take his job. Remember that trip to Colyville? The Creel brothers hit the Colonel for a job there and rode back with us."

"Damned if they didn't!"

"Couple of years ago, in San Antonio, I saw Red Wallace and Doc Ring with their heads together over drinks and talk. Didn't mean anything then. I didn't even think of it there in Colyville. Might not mean anything now."

Baldy was pulling hard at one side of his mustache and squinting ferociously. "Now Wallace is in your job! The Creels helped him! An' Doc Ring is headin' north about the same time the other bunch heads west."

"I'm curious about all that, Baldy. Curious about why Ring wanted to hire me. You ride with the Colonel. Keep your mouth closed and keep your eyes open."

"While you head north with Doc Ring?"

"If he hires me. If he doesn't, I'll be over the horizon a ways from your drive."

"Why?"

Bob shrugged.

Baldy pulled off his weathered old black hat and rubbed a calloused palm over his sunburned, bald pate.

"Somebody's a damn fool," Baldy decided. "Either a fool fer havin' such hunches or a fool to get tangled with 'em!"

"You're right, Baldy."

"Me," said Baldy, "I'm a fool twice. I'm havin' the same kind of hunches, an' I'll make the Pecos drive under that red-headed blowhard, Wallace. Look, Bob, on night herd I'll sing a lot of *Oh, Susanna.* On a dark night it'll locate me if you happen to drift around. And if I do any scoutin' out, I'll try to keep north of the drive, or ahead of it in that quarter. Make it easier to run acrost me that way."

Baldy clapped his hat back on. "A man can get shot in the back mighty easy," he reminded ominously.

"Watch your back and I'll watch mine," Bob Kenny said as they shook hands. "Baldy, I'll feel lots better knowing you're with the Colonel."

"Don't start feelin' until we see what happens. I quit the 5X. The Colonel may git his back up an' tell me to stay quit."

"If he does, make for Doc Ring's place on Mesquite Creek."

Baldy was stepping back on his roan horse. He said, "Uh-huh . . . so long," and wheeled on the backtrail.

CHAPTER TWO

Bullet Storm

DOC RING'S skimpy herd of eight hundred head, road-branded Bar O, pulled out from Mesquite Creek with scant ceremony, with Bob Kenny as trail boss, eleven men, and a giant, silent, jet-black cook called Jimp.

Doc Ring had meant to boss the drive himself.

"Had to hire what I could get. They aren't much," Doc Ring had complained when he hired Kenny. "I'd given up hoping you'd take the job. . . . So Stillman fired you over a measly fight?"

"He fired me because I got licked."

"Any man can get licked now and then, and not be licked inside. I know that Red Wallace. He's tricky in a knockdown fight."

Doc Ring was a small man, thin and hollow-chested, with a weakness for fine broadcloth, linen shirts, hand-tooled boots and gold wire braided around the crown of his pearl-gray Stetson. The two guns he wore in the holsters under his armpits were gaudy with silver and fancy with ivory handles.

But the man was dangerous and he was shrewd. He coughed often, deep in his reedy, hollow chest, like a man who belonged flat in bed. But Doc Ring could outride men of twice his bulk and muscle, and often did.

The Doc had stood in front of his two-room adobe ranch house in the Mesquite Creek chaparral, when Bob Kenny had arrived. Sunlight never seemed to tan his pale, thin face. The ivory handles of his guns were visible inside his open broadcloth coat. He held a brown paper cigarette between thin, supple fingers and looked Kenny in the eye.

"I met that Red Wallace in San Antone a couple of years ago," Doc Ring said. "He told me he liked to get a man off guard in a fight. Made it easier. That stiff-necked ass, Colonel Stillman, handed you a raw deal, to my way of thinking. I'll give you a better one, Kenny."

"I'm here," Kenny said. "I'll run the men my way."

"Deal your orders like they're needed. I'll tell you where to point your drive. The rest is up to you." Doc Ring pulled hard on his cigarette and flipped it away. He was smiling. He sounded sincere. "Takes a load off my mind. You'll see why when

you get a look at the men I've hired. Best I could do. They're road-branding now. Dutch Ike is in charge. I'll side you down the creek and turn the men over to you."

Two miles down Mesquite Creek, on another flat handy to water, the confusion, dust and bawl of nervous cattle was spiced with the rank stench of burning hair and flesh from hot branding irons.

Doc Ring rode to the fires and beckoned men to the spot while Kenny dismounted. On his magnificent bay stallion, Doc Ring looked smaller and more dandyish than ever as he lifted his voice. A thin smile was on Ring's pale face.

"This is Bob Kenny. Some of you may know him. He'll boss this drive. His orders go."

They were surprised. No man showed a welcoming look. They shuffled around, sizing him up. Bob Kenny weighed them quickly. A tough bunch, he decided. Every man packed a gun while working. But then, Doc Ring used men like these.

A bow-legged, young-old man, dusty and sweating, said, "You was ramroddin' the 5X, wasn't you? Over on the Jackknife range?"

"I'm ramrodding here now," Kenny said mildly. "Where's Dutch Ike?"

He knew the man without asking. Dutch Ike had been shouting an order as they came up, and had stalked to the fires, hat pushed back off his unshaven, dusty face. A big man, muscular and stolid looking, with bunches of muscle at the points of his cheeks that lumped and eased as he munched on a wad of tobacco.

Dutch Ike had a sour look as he jerked a thumb at his deep chest inside his greasy hide vest. "Me," he said.

"Keep 'em moving while I look around," Kenny ordered.

Dutch Ike spat. The moment drew out while he looked the new ramrod over. Doc Ring watched in silence. Kenny's eyes began to narrow. Ike turned away.

Doc Ring sat on the big bay, grinning maliciously. "Keep a hard bit in the Dutchman's mouth, or he'll throw you."

"Kind of looking for it then, weren't you?" Kenny asked as the men dispersed and he stood alone beside Ring's horse.

"If you can't handle Dutch Ike, you can't handle the rest of them," said Doc Ring. "Might as well find out fast."

That was the way it started. Three days later, the weathered chuck wagon and bed trailer lurched slowly out of the Mesquite Creek bottoms, heading north. The remuda followed, then the bunched, uneasy herd strung out after the point men.

"Damn poor stuff I'm starting with, and not much of it," Ring remarked, looking almost contemptuously at the strung-out, plodding herd. "Best I could do. Money's tight." Doc Ring's smile broadened. "I tried to make some deals to fill out my herd with other brands and sell up north for them. The tight-fisted fools wouldn't have it. They'd rather wait and hope for a little sure cash from the hide and tallow markets than gamble with Doc Ring."

"Some men hate to take a chance," Kenny murmured.

A spasm of coughing shook Doc Ring's reedy chest and brought a red flush to his pallid cheeks, but his eyes stayed on Kenny while he was coughing. He seemed to be looking for something. His glance had held that weighing look more than once since Kenny had appeared at Mesquite Creek.

Doc Ring wiped his mouth with a linen handkerchief. Even on the trail he wore the fine broadcloth and linen. He inspected the handkerchief with a quick, furtive look before thrusting it back in his pocket.

Kenny had marked that furtive glance at the handkerchief each time Doc Ring coughed and wiped his mouth. It told a lot. Doc Ring was a sick man, and knew it and was afraid. Bob Kenny himself

could almost call the future. Some day, red blood would spot the handkerchief, and Doc Ring's days would begin to run out.

"Stillman gave you a raw deal," Doc Ring said bluntly. His glance was weighing Kenny again. "You can't have much use for Stillman now."

"How would you feel?" Kenny asked evenly.

A wolfish edge came on Doc Ring's smile. "I'd feel like peeling off some of the blatherskite's hide. I'd show him. I'd have my try at the fellow who licked you. And them two who helped him."

Kenny had told Doc Ring about the Creel brothers, as frankly as Doc Ring had admitted knowing Red Wallace in San Antonio. Now Kenny looked at the plodding herd. "Most men would feel that way," he agreed.

Doc Ring was not satisfied. "That the way you feel?" he pressed.

"I'm human, I guess. It came to mind."

Doc Ring chuckled. "Keep it there. A man never knows what'll turn up."

IT WAS that kind of an outfit, that kind of a drive, beginning the long plod north out of the mesquite country. Nobody seemed to care much what was ahead, but the men were studying the new trail boss.

Kenny felt it on the first day, sensed it in the way voices trailed off around the night camp fire when he stepped close. Dutch Ike was one of them. The big, thick-chested man had evidently expected to boss the drive, and the sourness stayed with him. The men evidently were with him too, for what it might mean in the weeks and months ahead.

Bob Kenny had his own puzzle—why Doc Ring had hired him over Dutch Ike. The Frio River was behind. They were heading for the lusher bottoms of the Liano. The drive was shaking down. They had almost too many men for the small herd. Doc Ring rode out each morning, grub in his saddle bags, and returned at night on a dead beat horse, saying nothing about where he'd been. The weather was good. The cattle began to bed easy at night.

In the long hours alone in the saddle, Kenny thought of the 5X drive making its slow and ponderous advance toward a crossing of the Nueces, and pointing on into the rugged, parched Devil's River country.

Colonel Stillman had chosen that route rather than risk his rich outfit on the buffalo plains, where outlaws and cattle thieves infested the buffalo hunters working out of Fort Griffen.

Red Wallace and the Creel brothers, Carole Stillman and Baldy, were moving west. And Doc Ring's poor outfit was heading north. The hunch had evidently been wrong. Kenny struggled with the feeling he should be riding west. He might have misjudged Doc Ring. But not Red Wallace. Not the Creel brothers, or any friends they might have among the 5X men. A man like Red Wallace didn't scheme and fight bloodily for a chance to boss a Pecos drive without a reason.

They were still short of the Liano river bottoms the next night, when Doc Ring rode in to the camp fire and climbed stiffly down. He was dust-covered, A fit of coughing caught him as he stood at the edge of the wavering fire light.

On the other side of the fire, on a box against the chuck wagon wheel, in shadow, Bob Kenny watched talk stop and the sitting and sprawled men eye the reedy, hollow-chested figure, choking and shaking.

None of them showed pity or amusement. Doc Ring and his ivory-handled guns wasn't one to laugh at. The men watched with cold detachment while Doc Ring coughed it out and looked furtively at his handkerchief before putting it away.

That told a lot too. It fitted in with all

that Kenny had been watching. Doc Ring was no closer to his men than Kenny was, except for Jimp, the giant cook, who jumped to serve Doc Ring at every chance, and seemed to like doing it.

Doc Ring stepped into the fire light and looked around. "I made a deal today. Not going to Kansas. In the morning we'll swing west toward the head of the Liano. Anybody want to cut loose now?"

It caught them by surprise. Bob Kenny was sure of it by the way the men looked at each other. His own pulses began to pound harder as he sat stiffly on the box, watching from the shadows.

The hunch was working out. Doc Ring was beginning to show his hand a little. Even Dutch Ike, getting up heavily, seemed to be surprised.

"How far we go?" Dutch Ike demanded.

"As far as I say," said Doc Ring. His shoulders seemed to hunch in a little. He watched Dutch Ike fixedly. "Suit you?"

"Yah," said Dutch Ike after a moment.

"Suit the rest of you?" asked Doc Ring. A trace of the thin, malicious smile came on his face. Hard riding ahead."

"Hell, no!" It was the bow-legged, young-old-looking one who had recognized Kenny the first day. Kid Frio he called himself. Or the Frio Kid. No one cared. He had a jumpy temper, and had crossed words several times with Dutch Ike. "I started for Dodge City! The hell with headin' west! Pay me off!"

Doc Ring's eyes began to look yellow and luminous in the firelight. "Where you going from here?"

"None of your business! Pay me off! I'll get going in the morning!"

"You quit," said Doc Ring. "Saddle and get going now! I don't like a man that quits with dry country ahead." Doc Ring did not turn his head. "Kenny, send a couple of the boys riding out a few miles with the Kid, well beyond the horse herd. We don't want to come up a few horses short in the morning."

Kenny was on his feet before Ring finished. So were other men around the fire. That was dangerous talk with a hot-tempered one like the Kid.

The Frio Kid's rage keened in a loud, brittle challenge. "You callin' me horse thief?"

Doc Ring's thin malicious smile did not change. "Aren't you the damnedest horse thief who ever jumped the Nueces ahead of a noose?" he asked. "And a yellow, loose-mouthed talker to boot, I've heard down in Live-Oak County."

The Kid choked an oath and grabbed for his gun. Bob Kenny was almost in the line of fire. He stood there with eyes fixed intently on Doc Ring. He had a flash of wondering whether The Kid realized Doc Ring had goaded him deliberately. Then one of Doc Ring's silver-mounted guns crashed flame and smoke twice.

The Kid jack-knifed and spun half around and fell hard at the very edge of the fire. One of the men grabbed a foot quick and jerked him away from the coals.

A quarter of a mile away on the bed ground, cattle lunged up in fright that quivered and shook the star-bright night. The two men riding night watch began to sing loudly, and every man around the fire stiffened a little, listening, waiting for the first pounding thunder of a stampede.

Doc Ring spoke through the tension—mildly, with his gun back in his holster. "They're holding. The Kid ain't going to Kansas after all. Bury him tonight or in the morning, Kenny. Whichever suits you."

"Put him on a tarp, boys, and carry him out a ways. We'll take turns digging," Kenny ordered. He was rolling a cigarette. He was steady and casual, and the men were shrugging it off, not too concerned about the Kid.

Kenny guessed most of them had marked what he had been watching for.

The flash of Doc Ring's pale, supple hand inside his coat, almost too fast for any eye to mark it. Doc Ring was a wizard with a gun. It was Kenny's first actual sight of the reedy little man's threat in trouble.

Doc Ring had been cool, calm, sure of himself, his mind working as fast as his gun drew. Too cold, too fast, too dangerous for a hothead like the Frio Kid.

Doc Ring was calmly eating grub which had been kept warm in a Dutch oven when they carried the tarp-wrapped bundle and shovels out into the night. Bob Kenny was thoughtful. It had been a good hunch.

One man dead already. More would die, Kenny's next hunch was certain, before Doc Ring's wandering trail herd reached its destination. He was glad Baldy Emerson was out there on the Pecos trail. And anxious too, about Baldy. Men could get shot in the back.

They moved a little faster now, toward the upper reaches of the Liano River, pressing west. Grass and water were fair. Doc Ring had stopped riding out. He seemed in good spirits, except when the hard spells of coughing shook him. Then Doc Ring grew moody.

There was a mystery about all this too. A puzzle. Uncertainty. A man would think Doc Ring would be close to his gun riders. Most of them, Kenny guessed, were wanted by sheriffs. Dutch Ike was their man. Dutch Ike would have been a good trail boss.

Kenny sent men over toward the Liano River bottoms on a hunt. They brought back two deer and three wild turkeys. Game was plentiful over along the Liano.

It was a good land—a vast, empty, lonely country, not yet taken up for grazing, but getting dryer each day now, as the stolid, plodding advance of the strung-out herd reached farther west.

DUTCH Ike rode point most of the time. Doc Ring began to ride out again. He was gone three days the last time. The men loosened up with Doc Ring gone; they laughed more,

"NEVER ask him for a bear-hug, Uncle Erskine . . . not after he's had his evening bowl of Wheaties!"

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talked more around the open fire at night. There was even some singing and harmonica playing, that drifted out over the bedded herd and faded against the bright, blazing stars.

Long Jack, a lank and mostly silent man with a full, hooked nose, lowered the harmonica he was playing.

"Where's Ring headin'?" he called across the fire to Kenny, on his usual box by the chuck wagon wheel.

"Ask Ring," said Kenny.

Long Jack spat sizzling in the red coals. His thin mouth, under a drooping mustache, turned down in an open sneer. "You're bossin' the drive an' don't know?"

"That's right."

"How'd he come to hire you?"

"Ask Ring."

"Hell!" said Long Jack. He spat again, contemptuously, and cupped the harmonica back to his mouth.

Kenny sat without expression. He noted Dutch Ike's surly grin. Often at night, around the fire, Kenny had caught Dutch Ike's eyes on him. Sometimes they seemed to be glowing—like cat eyes, watching patiently.

Kenny had the tight-nerved feeling that trouble was shaping. He couldn't put his finger on it. Too many things he didn't know himself.

Jimp, the huge black cook, cleared his throat on the other side of the wagon, where he hunkered, alone and silent, most evenings. Kenny rolled another cigarette, and rolled his ideas up into a decision with the movements of his fingers.

He'd seen enough of the drive and of the men, to guess that Doc Ring had hired him because Dutch Ike was too thick with the men. They formed a close-knit company. Doc Ring would have been on the long trail alone with them. They'd have had the drive to themselves when Doc Ring was riding off.

They were a hard bunch. Doc Ring, in his reedy, hollow-chested way, was just as hard. But he was only one man. Kenny stood between them. Dutch Ike had no authority, but he held his surly resentment at Kenny bossing the drive. Doc Ring could be sure Kenny wasn't going to become one of the bunch.

That was it, Kenny decided as he drew deep on the cigarette. He was in the middle. And the men were tightening up against him, with or without Dutch Ike's prodding. If they'd been the usual trail crew, it wouldn't have meant much, but these men were different.

Doc Ring was not back the third day. The weather had been good. Dry, in this drying land. They brought the herd early to a broad, shallow water hole with a wide belt of sun-cracked mud around it. There was no wind. The sun was setting a sullen red. The cookfire smoke rose straight up, and the day's heat and the herd dust lay heavy.

"Weather tonight," Kenny announced after the remuda was rope-corraled and night horses put on short picket ropes near the wagon. "Hold 'em tight, men. Double guard out when those clouds hanging to the north begin to move in."

Long Jack, his tin plate piled with grub, just missed a sneer as he turned off to sit cross-legged on the ground and eat. "Hell! A few clouds ain't got you jumpy, have they?"

"Doesn't come often through here, but it comes hard, with plenty of lightning and noise," Kenny said calmly. "You can taste lightning in the air now."

"You taste it," said Long Jack. "My mouth's full of dust an' set for grub." Long Jack grinned loosely as several of the men laughed.

Kenny ate in tight-lipped silence, and then saddled a night horse and rode out around the bed ground. The gaunt, big-horned steers were restless. He was glad it was a small herd. As night marched in, the clouds were banking higher, blacker, in

the north. Streaks of livid lightning were beginning to thread the sable night beneath them.

The electricity building in the silent, heavy night might have built the wild and lonely feeling in Kenny, a sort of leashed violence which carried his thoughts winging over the long miles to the Stillman herd.

There too, Baldy was alone, and trouble was building. It could not be otherwise. In that frame of mind, Kenny stopped back at the wagon for coffee. Most of the men were already in their bedrolls. Black Jimp, with a lantern, was lashing his chuck wagon tarp snug.

"Mistah Doc gonna be out in this," Jimp's soft rumble observed. "Dat lil man oughtn't get so wet an' cole. Ain' good fo' him, sah."

"Think a heap of him, don't you, Jimp?"

"He kilt a white man what aimed to kill me," said Jimp simply. He came to the back of the chuck wagon, where Kenny was standing with the tin cup of hot coffee. Jimp's eyes rolled white in the lantern light. He was a giant, and he had at times the soft simplicity of a child. "He been good to me, sah. Man saves yo' life, owns yo' life, ain' hit so, sah?"

"A man could think so, Jimp."

"I thinks so, sah. Mistah Doc say maybe some day I save his life. Jes' stay with him an' watch close." Jimp's deep breath was like a soft whispering wind in advance of the storm. "That's whut I do, sah. Stay close an' watch."

So Doc Ring had one faithful friend. One pair of eyes and great hands and arms watching, waiting for trouble. Kenny understood about Jimp and Doc Ring now. It was more proof that Doc Ring's mind was keen, and sharply weighing everything. Doc Ring couldn't buy or hire faithfulness like he had in Jimp.

That devotion deserved a better man than Doc Ring, Kenny thought wryly as he smoked a cigarette and watched the sky to the north. The picketed night horses were restless too in the hushed night.

Second guard was riding the bed ground when Kenny called the other men out. Wind was rising, thunder rolling. A few miles to the north, great livid streaks of lightning were slashing from clouds to earth.

There had been a period when Kenny had thought the storm might miss them. It was not one storm, but several. They seemed to change course, to halt for a little, each storm taking its own erratic way. Now the camp was threatened.

Sleepy, cursing men grabbed slickers, tested cinches and made for the herd. The wind was coming sooner than Kenny had expected, picking up dust and heavier sand already, tearing red sparks out of Jimp's dying fire.

Bad lightning. In the brilliant, blue-white flashes, the riders could be seen starting their circle, singing, chanting soothingly. The cattle were up, hair roaching with fear as they jostled in a mass which turned away from the storm. Then the wind broke.

Kenny rode to the head of the herd, collar of his canvas jacket up against dust pelting the back of his neck. The wind was trying to tear his hat away from the chin strap. This was a stampede storm. The men ahead of him knew it. Their figures, ghost-seen in the flashes of lightning, were keeping clear of the tossing, clashing horns of the lead steers.

The rain was a rumble, a roar, rushing close. It hit them in sudden, solid sheets of water and sand. And the lightning was on them, around them, on all sides. And then one stunning, blinding bolt struck in the herd itself.

It was a blaze so brilliant that the world seemed to dissolve in glare. It was a thunderclap which left ears useless. It tore the night apart. Kenny's horse reared wildly and plunged away, trembling, and

the herd broke in a panicky stampede, but not in a forward rush from the wind. It scattered away from the lightning bolt in all directions.

A senseless, earth-shaking wave of crazed steers charged toward Kenny's horse. The riders ahead of him were in the path too. The stampede was around Kenny in a moment, his horse running with it.

He heard the faint, futile pop of gunshots as men tried to turn some of the stampede. Lightning flashes showed the fear-crazed steers all around. One of the ghost riders was some fifty yards to the left of Kenny. The bellow of his gun was audible. It sounded as lightning flashed. Kenny felt rather than heard the sodden blow of gun lead striking the base of his saddle horn; he heard the shrill ricochet of the misshapen bullet. He slapped a hand down and found the horn a third cut off.

The tar-black storm blotted all sight in the second it took Kenny to draw his own gun. All the leashed violence which had been building in him two hours ago came unfettered.

That screeching ricochet was no accident. Murder had been tried. The shot made from full wild gallop had been meant for Bob Kenny or his horse. Either target would have dropped Kenny under the pulping drive of stampeding hoofs.

Lightning flared. The dim-seen rider was looking toward him as Kenny's hand gun spewed its muzzle flare twice. Then the tarry night closed in again. His horse broke stride; Kenny thought the horse was going down. Maybe wounded. But the horse recovered and took up the wild gallop over ground getting muddy and treacherous. The stampede plunged into a dip, swept up a steep slope. When Kenny looked through more lightning glare, the other rider was not there. He'd been dropped, or had hauled back a little.

It was a wild, dangerous ride while the storm swept on and outdistanced the stampede. Lightning drew off into the distance. Thunder rolled in receding peals. Kenny managed to ride up ahead of the lead steers and draw off to one side and rein up his blowing, steaming horse. The stampede would run out in the aftermath of the storm. After daylight, they could count the losses and start rounding up.

It was bad enough next morning. Eight head had been killed on the bed ground by the one searing strike from the sky. Some of the herd had broken back and mired and snapped legs and drowned in the big, shallow water hole, which was larger and deeper now.

Other cripples and dead ones were scattered out over the prairie for miles. But none of the men had died.

Doc Ring had ridden in some time around the chill damp dawn, soaking wet, exhausted from a long hard ride. He was coughing; he looked peaked, unhealthy, when Kenny came into camp after carefully retracing in the first gray light the way he had gone with the stampede.

""Round 'em up!" Doc Ring ordered. "Never mind if you miss a few." Doc Ring noticed the bullet gouge at the base of Kenny's saddle horn. He stepped close and stared at it. "Lose any men last night?"

"Haven't counted noses yet," said Kenny briefly.

That was all. But when the men straggled in for fresh horses and grub in the early brilliance of clean fresh sunlight, Doc Ring watched closely. He was counting noses as Kenny was counting, and listening to the talk.

Two riders headed in from the north while part of the men were already eating and gulping Jim's scalding strong coffee.

Kenny faced the eating men.

"Somebody took a couple of shots at me last night during the stampede. Almost shot my saddle horn off. You all know what almost happened to me," he said.

They knew. They'd stopped eating. One by one, tin plates of grub were set on the ground. The men eased up on their feet, eyeing one another and Kenny's tight, hard face.

Doc Ring stood off to one side. The faint, malicious smile touched his haggard face. He stood loosely, watching, fresh dry coat unbuttoned, one ivory-handled gun visible in its shoulder holster. He had unbuttoned the coat when Kenny started talking.

"The man who did it want to speak up?" asked Kenny.

Not a face showed guilt.

They were uncertain about Kenny and about each other. Mostly about Kenny. He'd been an untried man so far. He'd taken talk which suggested he wasn't so dangerous. He might have been relying on Doc Ring to back him in authority. But here it was without warning—showdown.

Kenny said softly, slowly, "The man who did it is a yellow dog. A snake. I wouldn't wipe my boots on him. He's a liar because he's not admitting it now."

Silence.

Faces were getting hard. Some red. Tension was stretching out and out.

"None of my business what any of you men have been," said Kenny in the same soft, slow voice, "but I took it every one of you was a man."

Dutch Ike growled, "If I do it, I tell you, mister! Don't let any of that come at me!"

"It's for the man who tried to coyote me. Can't I make him step out and say so?"

"We ain't all here," said Dutch Ike.

"I wasn't to the north, where they've been," said Kenny. "Anyway, I shot back at the man. Over there in the wagon, hid down under the driver's seat, is a hat the stampede ran over, near where I was shot at. It's got a bullet hole in the crown. The yellow dog can go get it."

One man had come in hatless. All eyes swung to him. Men moved hastily away. Stubbled face contorted, mouth working, he was already snatching at his gun.

Kenny had called him, knowing who he was, ready for it. His first bullet struck Long Jack above the belt, his second high up in the chest.

Doc Ring spoke coolly as the blasts died away and Kenny stood with cocked, smoking gun, looking for more trouble.

"One skunk less, an' nice shooting. Jimp will plant him. Grub up and round up. Dry country ahead and I'm in a hurry."

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CHAPTER THREE

The Trail Wolf's Fang

WEST, over the divide between the Lianos headwaters and the Devil's River country. There the heat began to come down. The land roughened up in canyons and draws and the gray sage began to grow. Water holes became scarce, and it would be bone dry a little later.

Near the headsprings of Devil's River, they found the first dead, bloating steer. It bore the great 5X on the left side, of the Stillman home brand, and the small Rafter S of Colonel Stillman's road brand. They located other steers that had gone over cutbanks. One canyon prong had a dozen dead steers that had charged blindly over a fifty foot drop.

"Stampede," said Doc Ring. "Looks like company ahead and Stillman is having his worries." The malicious grin was shading Doc Ring's mouth.

They came on the trail Colonel Stillman's big herd had left. The wheel marks of the heavy wagons were there also. Bob Kenny, scouting out ahead of the remuda and Jimp's chuck wagon, was strangely moved by the sight.

There was his hunch. There over the hoof-churned earth had passed Baldy Emerson, Carol Stillman, Red Wallace, the Creel brothers, and Colonel Stillman with his empty sleeve and fiery, imperious ways.

5X strays were sighted. "Throw 'em in the herd," Doc Ring ordered.

They were trailing Colonel Stillman's drive like a half-starved wolf following fat cows and calves.

"He's in a hurry," Doc Ring said. "Not stopping to clean up his stampedes or strays. Or his men don't give a damn." It was the gray dawn. The men were gulping Jimp's grub and coffee. Doc Ring had had a bad spell of coughing. He looked more thin and hollow-chested than ever as he stood with a tin cup of steaming coffee and looked around at the men. "If this keeps up, we'll have a bigger herd," Doc Ring said, "and a fat bonus for every man—depending on how well we do."

The man looked at Doc Ring and at one another. They understood that kind of talk. Several of them grinned. Cinch Spalding, a lanky, close-mouthed man with reddish hair and mustache and a blotchy spatter of freckles on his face and the backs of his hands, chuckled with a new kind of friendliness.

"Maybe you knew what you was doing when you turned away from Kansas," Cinch decided.

"I do business where I find it," said Doc Ring. The malicious smile touched his face. "From here to the Pecos, it gets worse every mile for a cattle drive." He took a swallow of hot coffee. "The bigger the drive, the worse it gets," he said, "and better for doing business the way I like to do business."

It told a lot Kenny hadn't been sure of. It told that Colonel Stillman's herd was being bled of sound cattle for Doc Ring's benefit. It proved that Doc Ring and Red Wallace had an understanding, a plan. A man could look into the hazy distance ahead and see death and destruction moving west with Colonel Stillman's drive.

They found a grave—a lonely mound of fresh, drying earth on a little rise near the two-day old camp site. It was about two days, Kenny judged. There was no headboard on the grave.

"Dig it up," Doc Ring decided. "Let's see who they buried."

While a man was riding after the wagons for shovels, and the herd was plodding past, Kenny said evenly, "Might be Red Wallace."

Doc Ring, dismounted, smoking a cigarette, looked at him closely. "Or old Stillman himself," Doc Ring said finally,

and the way he said it was like a cold deck ace showing briefly.

With Colonel Stillman dead, Carol, his daughter, would own the rich 5X drive. If something happened to Carol. . . .

One man—one girl, between Doc Ring and a fortune. . . . .

Kenny prowled the camp site while the drag dust of the herd went by. He found where tents had been pitched, where a narrow-tired buggy had rolled. He found the marks of small boots in the floor space where one small tent had stood. Half-covered by scuffed dirt, he found a woman's small tortoise shell comb.

It was a small and fragile object when Kenny dusted it off and held it in his hand, and it brought Carol into vivid memory, as he'd last seen her on the long gallop across the prairie to head him off.

Two short days ago, Carol had slept here under tent canvas, and faced another day. How had she faced it? What had she been thinking? Or fearing? Death had struck at this camp. Kenny lifted the comb to his nostrils; it seemed to him some of the clean, fresh fragrance and sparkle of Carol herself still clung to it. She had ridden on, but she was here too.

Kenny shoved the comb in his pocket and turned back to the grave where Doc Ring waited with four of the men.

The bodies had been wrapped in canvas. Two of them, buried in a common grave. Doc Ring had never been more poker-faced than Kenny was as the bodies were laid beside the open grave and the canvas opened.

"Latigo Raines and Tex Jones," Kenny said, without expression.

He thought Doc Ring looked relieved. Latigo and Tex had been shot. Nothing else to tell what had happened. They were put back in the ground again, to rest forever, forgotten in this great sweep of dying desolation, just two more men who had died heading toward the Horsehead Crossing of the Pecos.

And how many more men were buried back toward the Nueces crossing? Baldy Emerson, perhaps. Or Colonel Stillman himself, although two tents erected at this camp spoke against that. But men the Colonel could depend on were being whittled away. The Colonel still might not realize it. Kenny did as they galloped on to overtake the herd.

Time was running out fast, and Kenny knew it with hard certainty as Doc Ring rode close beside him with a thin smile of satisfaction.

"Not Red Wallace or the Creel brothers," Doc Ring said, jerking his head back toward the grave. "Or that stiff-necked ass, Stillman. They're still ahead —especially Stillman."

Kenny rode for a moment. "What makes you think Stillman is still ahead?"

"They're driving on to the Pecos," said Doc Ring. "Tonight I'll make a fast ride ahead after we bed down, and scout it out."

"Then what?"

Doc Ring looked over at him. It might have been the drag dust they were entering that set Doc Ring off into a violent spasm of coughing and choking. Kenny had never seen it worse. Doc Ring doubled over. His face grew purple.

He was gasping when it ended and he reached for a fine linen handkerchief and wiped his mouth and looked furtively before putting the handkerchief away. Kenny, watching from the corner of his eye, as he always did now, saw a fresh red stain on the white linen. Doc Ring dabbed the handkerchief back with a fierce and frantic movement. A second stain was there when he looked.

He was licking his lips and swallowing as he shoved the handkerchief away and glanced toward Kenny's uninterested profile.

"Then what?" repeated Doc Ring. His voice was thin, harsh, as it had never sounded before. "Business is business, where you find it," Doc Ring said. "A

man only lives once—and not too long at that. He's a fool if he misses any chances."

DOC Ring ate a hearty supper. The herd was bedding down as he saddled the best horse in his own fine string, took a filled canteen and saddle-bag grub from Jimp, and rode on ahead into the twilight.

Jimp's great black figure stood motionless, watching him go. There was a soberness about Jimp that suggested some animal-like premonition that all was not well.

Kenny rode out a little later, as he often had, no man particularly curious about what he was doing. He was trail boss. His business was his own. Tonight, he had an idea they were glad to see him go. It was only a thought. His mind was on the 5X drive, far ahead. Doc Ring had sparked new ideas in the men. Easy profit. A broad hint of money outside the law. Easy money, with which they all were familiar. He guessed they were going to talk about it tonight, around Dutch Ike. And he thought again that Doc Ring had shrewdly planned far ahead when he put a stranger rather than Dutch Ike bossing the drive. Doc Ring was not alone against them now, with easy wealth in sight.

The moon was in the quarter; a man could almost reach and pluck the bright cold stars. Coyote clamor wailed and sobbed across the drying world of sand and sage as Kenny pressed his fine horse west.

The human coyotes and wolves too, Bob Kenny thought, as he rode hard on the dim-sighted swath of the 5X passing. He might overtake Doc Ring at any time, and that might mean a showdown between them. Kenny loosened the gun in his holster. Doc Ring was a sick, savage man now.

It was along in second guard, sometime before midnight, when he sighted the far glint of campfire light. A little later, when he pulled the horse up for a blow, and then an easing walk, the drift of cool night wind brought the distant bawl and mutter of the restless herd.

Kenny swung off, circling out. He had the wind with him. He was an unseen figure out in the star-hung night when he heard the distant muted singing of the night guards circling the bed ground.

He dismounted, tightened cinches, walked in closer, leading the horse, and sat relaxing on the ground, waiting, listening. He was there when a few sparks from the stirred campfire marked coffee and the guards' changing. The camp was on the other side of the bed ground. There would be a small tent there, with small boot marks in the earth, and Carol, dreaming perhaps of a kinder land of running water and rich grass.

The whispering wind brought the slow sad singing of a third guard rider, "Oh, Susanna, don' you cry fo' me. . . ."

The great uncertainty rolled from Bob Kenny. Only one man could sing so lugubriously, so badly. Baldy Emerson was still alive! Kenny drifted closer in the saddle, a silent shadow. The rider came circling the herd; a cautious match flared as he lit a smoke and came on.

"Baldy?"

"Who the—"

Kenny sang cautiously, "Oh, Susanna—"

The rider came toward him at a slow trot. "Bob?"

"Yes."

"My God, I'm glad to see you! Let's ride out! Look sharp! Red Wallace is somewhere on a horse tonight."

"Doc Ring's drive is back over the horizon. He changed his mind about Kansas and turned up the Liano. Had it planned all along, of course."

"I mighta knowed it!" Baldy cursed. "One damn thing after another has hit us!"

"The Colonel and Carol all right?"

"So far. The little gal's lookin' kinda peaked, though. Like she had a idea somethin' was bad wrong. Her old man's gittin' that look too, now'n then. I've nigh sung myself crazy on that song, nights, an' grabbed excuses to scout out. I'd give up hope you'd show up."

"Ring had Latigo and Tex dug up to see who it was."

"The damned body snatcher! Figgered it mighta been one of his friends, I reckon! Tex got in a fight with Steve Creel. Leastways, that's what was told. Latigo dragged his gun to take it up. They say he cut down on Steve Creel from the back. Bo Creel shot him."

"The damned liars!" Bob Kenny said past set teeth.

"Red Wallace swore it was so. He was there an' seen it. Told the Colonel it was pure self-defense on the Creels' part. Red said he'd stand by the Creels as good men. It's all six-gun law in these parts anyway, an' most of the men'd stand by him on it." Baldy spat. "Hell! He had the Colonel an' the Colonel knowed it! This ain't the army. Red's trail boss, with part of the men backin' him up openly. The Colonel didn't have a good man to take Red's job. Maybe Red was tellin' the truth anyway. I think the Colonel wants to git over this last dry stretch to the Pecos before he tries a curb bit on anything. He's been stampeded an' rustled until he swears a curse is on him."

"Add it up, Baldy. Since the Colonel planned to pull out of Texas, Doc Ring's sights have been on him. Why deal in shady stuff in a small way, when a man could get a whole big trail herd and supplies to set up a ranch? Doc Ring had about run out his rope in South Texas anyway. Too many men watching him. The Colonel was heading this way beyond the law. Just him and Carol. No one ahead or behind worrying about him. A fortune in good beef, an outfit to start a ranch, all ripe for rustling. All it needed was the right man planted among the Colonel's men, and Doc Ring with help close. No law to worry about, everyone ahead strangers to the Colonel and his outfit."

"Means the Colonel would be kilt," said Baldy.

"Yes."

"His daughter too," Baldy guessed harshly.

"Or worse," said Kenny more harshly.

"An' I was worryin' about my own hair!' Baldy was past cursing. "It shapes up, Bob—all but you bossin' Doc Ring's bunch."

"If I don't track right, I can be killed," reminded Kenny. "Ring thinks I hold a grudge against the Colonel and Red Wallace and the Creels. He's planned it like a stacked deck."

"Figgered on everything, didn't he?" said Baldy. "The snake!"

Message from Garcia

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"He rode this way ahead of me tonight, rigging everything for his jackpot play somewhere from here to the Pecos," guessed Kenny. "Red Wallace moved out to meet him, I reckon."

Baldy was silent a long moment. His comment had a savagely helpless sound. "What do we do, Bob? Even if the Colonel knowed, an' believed, which I doubt, he's in a corner. Ain't no law! Ain't no help!"

"How many men can the Colonel trust?"

"Four, includin' Gus, the cook. Then the Colonel an' his daughter. An' you."

"Not enough against Red Wallace, Doc Ring and the men who'll do as they say." Kenny sat thinking. They had pulled up behind a rocky fold of the land, beyond any earshot.

Baldy said uncertainly, "Two days to the Pecos from here an' no more water. Whatever happens comes quick now."

"Doc Ring and Wallace must be planning it tonight," guessed Kenny. "Easiest way would be to get the Colonel first. Make it look like an accident. The rest would be easy. When the 5X beef hit the Pecos, it would be Doc Ring's. Anyone who didn't agree could be floated down the Pecos. Bodies don't come back from the canyons downstream."

Baldy's growl held a promise. "Them cutthroats won't Pecos me!"

"They'll have the 5X. Baldy, I've heard of snakes fangin' themselves to death with their own poison. If we could make Wallace's bunch think Doc Ring's bunch was aiming to doublecross them, which they probably are, and make Doc Ring's bunch think Wallace and his men were trying to cut them out—"

Baldy whistled softly. He grunted. He chuckled. "Snake agin snake! Fangin' each other!"

"Take a chance on getting killed tonight?"

"Takin' it anyway, ain't I?"

"Light a shuck on the backtrail then, and try what I tell you. . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

Pecos Sixes

THE two tents were well away from the chuck wagon, the picketed night horses and the sleeping trail crew. The three big freight wagons, tassel-topped buggy and a buckboard cut off the tents from the crew, giving Carol and the men their privacy. Baldy had said the Colonel's tent was the north one, the larger, and the Colonel was a sound sleeper.

The campfire was a yellow point beyond the wagons when Bob Kenny eased on foot to the back of the Colonel's tent. A picketed horse stamped and snorted. The Colonel was snoring gently as Kenny eased through the tent flaps, gun in hand.

"Wha—what?" the Colonel demanded sleepily as a hand jogged his shoulder. The canvas camp bed creaked as the Colonel reared up in his white nightgown.

The jabbing gun muzzle emphasized Kenny's low, cold order. "Not a sound, Colonel! Sit quiet and listen. This is Bob Kenny!"

"With a gun? You scoundrel—"

"Last warning, Colonel! I'm here to help you!"

The Colonel subsided, muttering. He was brave enough. Kenny started to talk, fast, low. The Colonel snapped, "I don't trust you, Kenny!"

"Don't trust you either," said Kenny bluntly. "You're a hot-headed fool! I'm thinking about Carol!"

"I'll not sneak away from my own cattle drive like a thief in the night! A damned coward!"

"Tell your daughter to ride out with me where she'll be safe."

"Ridiculous! What scheme is this, Kenny?"

Kenny was in a cold and quiet rage by now, even though he'd known it would probably end like this. And you couldn't take a man and his daughter from under the noses of all that trail crew at gun point. Wasn't time to handle them anyway. Might have wasted too much time as it was.

"I've told you, Colonel. Let Carol know. She has more sense than you'll ever have. And if you aren't all hot-headed idiot, keep quiet while I leave!"

A moment later, Kenny was outside again, turning back between the tents, gun in hand. His mind was on Carol, in the adjoining tent, when he halted abruptly, gun muzzle flipping up—

It was close. He was challenged. "Who are you?"

Carol's voice. She had on some kind of a dark wrapper, and at first sight had looked like an overcoated man standing there, gun in her own hand. Close. Carol would never know how close she'd been to getting shot.

"It's Bob Kenny!" he told her under his breath.

"W-with a gun?" Carol's voice strained thin. "You were in father's tent! I knew you hated him. B-but not like this! So you've been near us all along. And we've had trouble and more trouble!"

"Go talk to your father, Carol!"

"I—"

Colonel Stillman's rasping whisper came through his tent canvas. "Come here, Carol!"

She hurried, still upset, uncertain. Kenny went on with long quiet strides. He'd done all he could, and perhaps was too late now for what had yet to be done.

He tried to guess where Ring and Wallace might have met, if they had met, and to keep between that point and camp. He was some miles out, listening, when his horse's ears pricked toward the south. Kenny wheeled that way and rode fast, stopped to listen, heard nothing. He started on, and suddenly, half a mile away, a match flared to a cigarette, clearly seen.

Kenny came quartering from the direction of camp, calling as he closed in, "Red Wallace?"

"Who is it?"

"Baldy Emerson! Trouble at camp!" Kenny said, and hoped it worked as he came in alongside the suspicious rider. It did. He sighted a hand shoving a gun back into its holster.

"What trouble?" Red's rough voice demanded.

Kenny had him covered an instant later, as they paused there side by side. "Unbuckle the belt and shuck it, Red!"

Hands went up shoulder high. "Kenny!" Red Wallace ground out. He could see Kenny's gun gesture menacingly. His belt and holstered gun slipped off and thudded on the ground. Wallace's hands lifted again. "You been trailing me clean to the Pecos?"

Doc Ring hadn't told him. More proof Doc Ring was planning deeply. Kenny chuckled. "You didn't think Doc Ring trusted you, Red? Or Bo and Steve Creel? Or the others. Doc promised you to me after he got the size-up tonight."

Red Wallace choked on it. "You mean that smooth-talkin', double-crossin'—"

"Shut up," Kenny said, and he was chuckling. It was easy now—for who could come like he had, knowing everything, save at Doc Ring's orders? Red Wallace would wildly believe anything he heard now.

"Doc," said Kenny, "knows a crook like you, and that bunch you're heading. Doc's got the men he needs. With you out of the way, Doc means to ride in and take over while you're strung out on the trail. But you won't be there, Red. Or the Creel boys. Doc don't want 'em. Too crooked. I got Baldy Emerson tonight, thinking he was one of the Creels. Too bad. I liked Baldy. I'll get the Creels tomorrow."

"He said go on to the Pecos! The

lyin' little dog!" Red gritted. "Going to cold-deck me—"

The drive of Kenny's offside spur made his horse jump. Kenny yelled at the horse. Swore. His gun spewed a shot as Red Wallace ducked low and drove his own spurs and rode for his life, wheeling sharply away.

Kenny fired again and again as the race stretched out across the plain. He missed each time. His horse dropped rapidly back. Red Wallace got his saddle gun and started firing back. He drew away. He escaped.

Kenny circled away, smiling grimly. It would have been a pleasure to shoot it out tonight with Red, even terms, but Red was needed to ride back to camp with his rage. He'd find Baldy gone, as Kenny had said.

Bible oaths stacked high would never convince Red Wallace now that Doc Ring wasn't a mortal enemy. Taking over the Stillman herd would wait until the matter of Doc Ring was settled.

A man could figure it that way in his mind. Red Wallace was a mad dog now. Could you be sure a mad dog would act like you thought? Kenny was troubled as he rode south. He had to take the risk. And if Baldy failed. . . .

At sunset, a low butte had been visible off in the southwest. From the 5X camp it was a cloud-like shadow some distance off in the southeast. Kenny rode to its north base in the starlight and dismounted on the talus slope above the level of the plain.

He unsaddled and made himself comfortable. From this higher point he could look across the rough sweep of the land and see the 5X campfire stirred to brightness, far away. Seated on a flat rock, pulling on a cigarette, Kenny thought of the war council Red Wallace must be having. Red would be giving his own version of what had happened, making sure every gun in the outfit was ready.

If there were only some way of making sure the Colonel and Carol would come through this safely! There was no way to make sure. He tried. It had to be like this. The uncertainty nagged and drew out. . . .

The horseman came toward the butte from the East, while dawn still lurked below the horizon. Kenny's rifle was on the sound, then on the final cautious approach across the talus slope. A whistle. Kenny whistled back and lowered the rifle.

Baldy came on and dismounted. "How'd you do?" he inquired.

"Had luck. Red Wallace is primed."

"I dern near missed my little weasel," said Baldy. "Got ahead of him, an' rode closet to his camp afore I turned back. About three mile out I was sittin', wondering if it was all bad luck, when he come slopin' along, ridin' easy an' coughin' like a sawmill exhaust gone wild. Never did hear his hoss. Woulda missed him. Knowed it had to be him, so I fogged right out after him, callin', 'Doc Ring!' "

Baldy chuckled. "Wonder he didn't catch on. He pulled up an' I hollered, 'Red sent me! He fergot to warn you!' "

"If he hadn't seen Red tonight, that would have been a spot," said Kenny as Baldy hunkered beside him.

"Uh-huh. I was sure hopin' he had," agreed Baldy. "It settled him, though. I was right in beside him when he unloaded some some coughin'." Baldy spat. "So I reaches over an' helps him stop it with my gun barrel. I yanked him over an' spilled his gun outa them shoulder holsters while he was still foggy.

" 'Red sent me to kill you, friend,' I says pleasantly, 'which I aim to do. You're too greedy. An' just to make you feel good about it, Doc, I'm headin' into your camp with word you an' Kenny an' Red Wallace want half the boys to move up fast an' help take over the 5X. They'll be met an' took care of. I met Bob Kenny scoutin'

out, an' fixed him. With you dead too, Doc,' I says, 'we'll ride back an' git your cattle, an' be fat as a Christmas goose when we hit the Pecos!' "

"Doc and Red will never stop shooting long enough to talk it over," said Kenny, chuckling. He sobered. "Baldy—we've had too much luck tonight."

"When you reckon they'll tangle?"

"Quick as Doc Ring can get his men riding," guessed Kenny, standing up, "Doc will try to surprise Red Wallace as much as possible—if I know Doc. Waiting won't help him any now."

"You see the Colonel?"

"He stayed in camp. God knows what he'll do, with that temper." Kenny was saddling. "We'd better move in closer. I asked the Colonel to pass word to Gus, the cook, and the few men Gus knows can be trusted. Baldy, it's going to be a day."

"Somebody," said Baldy with dry understatement, "will get hurt."

They had chuckled with a certain macabre humor over what they'd done, but as they rode off the talus slope, they were sober. Any way you added up what was ahead, this was a day of guns, of slaughter.

THE lone rider found them in the first mile. It was Carol Stillman, dressed like a payroll hand, riding a black horse, with booted rifle and a cartridge belt and gun.

Kenny took all that in, barely seen, as Carol sat her stock saddle between him and Baldy. He had asked the Colonel to send her to the butte. A great relief filled him as Carol said hurriedly, "Red Wallace came in like you said he might, Bob. That convinced father."

"What did Red say?"

"He said you surprised him, Bob, and were going to kill him. Before Red got away, you admitted Doc Ring was going to raid us, and had planned it back home, before we left. Red said you were Doc Ring's right hand man, because father fired you."

"What's Wallace going to do, Carol?"

"Father took charge," said Carol.

"Wallace let him?"

"He didn't object. Father was issuing orders when I left. Just like he was back in the army."

"Riding into battle again," said Kenny. His chuckle was reassuring as he reached out and pressed Carol's hand. "He's a great old war dog, Carol. What are his plans?"

"There's a long rock dyke about a mile on the backtrail," said Carol. "He's going to ambush there. Surprise them. Even in daylight, the men and horses can be hidden behind those rocks."

Kenny said thoughtfully, "Doc Ring isn't a fool. He's been told Red's men will be waiting. Doc will try some kind of a surprise."

Carol was worried. "Father quietly arranged to have the men he can trust stay close to him, where they can get his orders, and act together."

"Used his head there," Kenny approved.

"I'm a fool," Baldy muttered. "You kilt me tonight an' put me safe outa it, Bob, but I reckon I better raise up from the dead an' move in with the Colonel. He'll need another hand he knows he can trust."

"Doc Ring" decided Kenny, "can use a dead man too. I'll try to cut in with his bunch and earn my pay by helping Doc kill off as many of Red Wallace's outlaws as I can."

"Snaky," said Baldy. "Purely snaky, ain't we?" A thought struck him. "Listen! I'll be in front of your sights! Be dern careful who you're shootin' at!"

Don't get cross-eyed yourself," suggested Kenny. "Carol, ride on to that butte. Get up to the top of it, if you can. If it's daylight, you can see what's happening. If Doc Ring should have luck and take over—"

That was all Kenny could say. All he could do. He doubted that Carol would watch from the butte. This might be their last talk. Carol knew it. She was calm.

"Ring won't, Bob. We'll see the Pecos together. And Bob—Bob—"

"You fool!" Baldy snorted. "Kiss her like you both want! Or ain't either of you got sense enough t' know what you want?"

Baldy reined his horse aside, and from the saddle Bob Kenny leaned over, arms hungry, mouth dry, until it met the warm, yielding gift of Carol's lips.

She held his hand for a final moment, tightly, and spoke to Baldy. "Thank you, Baldy. I've had sense a long time."

"Knowed it," said Baldy.

"Tonight we'll be in camp talking it over," said Carol.

That was her "good luck"—her promise. She sat silently on the black horse, fading back into the starlight as they rode away.

There was a great quiet in the night. Dawn had not yet brushed the horizon, but it was near. Coyotes yapped and clamored across the distance, as if wise in the ways of men and death.

Doc Ring was later than he should have been. It made Kenny more certain of Doc Ring's craftiness. In the East, night faded ever so slightly, hardly sensed. Kenny was between the ambush and Doc Ring's camp, holding the horse quiet for long moments now, listening intently.

He heard it first like the pulse in his own ears—then as a tremor of the night itself, hammering faster, nearer, louder. . . . Hoofs. Many hoofs. They came in a long, pounding run, toward him, toward the ambush where Colonel Stillman's men waited.

Kenny pursed his lips, frowning. It would take all Doc Ring's massed men spurring hard to come with such a pounding rush. And yet there they came riding furiously to overwhelm the 5X camp.

He barely glimpsed the mass of running horses as they stormed through the near dawn, and then he lifted into a hard gallop that swept into the dust of Doc Ring's advance and pulled up toward the last riders.

He was close before he began to be puzzled; closer before doubt grew mightily. In the starlight it was hard to see clearly. Kenny was almost at the heels of the last horses before he guessed the truth.

Several riders made up that pounding rush. The rest were led horses running on ropes to right and left of each man. They made a great pounding rush which would spring any ambush before dawn. And Doc Ring and the bulk of his gunmen were elsewhere in the night. Doc was crafty. Very crafty. . . .

The rough rock dyke lifted to the left, funneling them in against higher ground on the right. Kenny bore over to the right,

knowing what was coming, bent low. He was a target too.

One gun signaled with a lance of flame. The dyke erupted with gunfire. A led horse plunged down with a scream. The riders pulled up sharply, wheeling back, and the mass of led horses rushed on, and the gunfire followed them.

The men had swung down from their blowing horses as if shot. Three men. Four men, when Bob Kenny called his name and joined them. He recognized Cinch Spalding's voice.

"Kenny? We heard you was dead!"

"Not quite! Where's Doc Ring?"

Cinch Spalding laughed. "We flushed 'em for Doc. They're fannin' them led hosses right toward their camp with guns. Look!"

Stillman's men had hit saddles and spurred after the rush of hoofs, too eager to notice they were doing all the shooting. Red Wallace, crazy mad, was probably behind it.

But on beyond all that, gunfire stroked the night. Even here where they talked, one could feel the earth's unease, as thousands of heavy steeds stampeded off the bedground toward them.

"All Doc wanted," said Cinch Spalding, "was to know where they was hit, so he could point the stampede. It'll break 'em up. Get yore handkerchief up over your face, Kenny! Every man that ain't got a handkerchief acrost his face is gun meat. Doc and the others'll be ridin' in a bunch in the dust of that stampede, cuttin' down any man they find scattered out in daybreak without his face covered. Hell! By sunrise, they won't be enough of them to bother with. Doc says get 'em all. He's wild."

Cinch climbed his horse. "We better ride up on them rocks an' let the worst of the fuss git past."

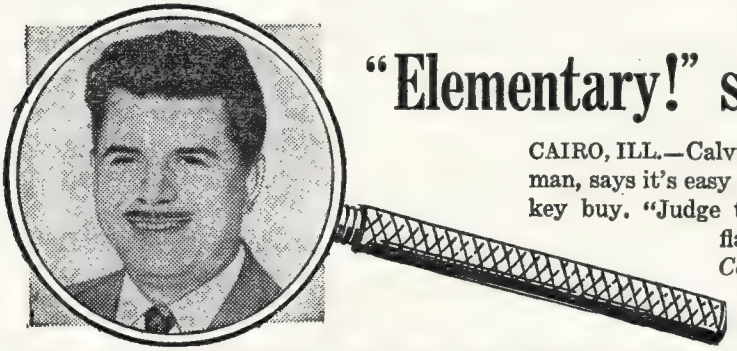
Behind the handkerchief mask, Kenny's mouth was a hard, bitter line. The 5X men were outfoxed. They'd be overwhelmed, hurried back, scattered and confused by that wave of crazed hoofs and horns driven off the bedground by the guns and yells at their flanks.

Half an hour later would have given enough light to see what was happening, Kenny thought bitterly as he rode with the other three up among the rough dyke rocks. Already, the first gray of dawn was lifting to the East.

They topped the rocks, Cinch Spalding bragging, "There'll be a two-year drunk for every one of us in that 5X herd. An' I mean to have my cut."

"Fire!"

THAT crisp military command sent Kenny ducking low on the off side of his horse as guns crashed. His horse gave a great leap, staggered as Kenny flung himself off. A riderless horse bolted past him. Another was down.



The gasping rattle of a dying man came off the rocks as Kenny flattened. They'd been in clear silhouette against the starlight. Good targets. And Colonel Stillman and some of his men hadn't been flushed toward the stampeding herd.

Kenny was alone, six-gun in hand. The thunder of the stampede was sweeping closer as Kenny yelled, "Baldy?"

"Hold it!" Baldy's shout came back. "That's Bob!"

"Handkerchiefs over your faces! Everyone else gets shot by Ring's men! They're following the stampede!"

"Up handkerchiefs!" Colonel Stillman bellowed.

Kenny almost smiled. Colonel Stillman had his war, his command again. And he'd outfoxed Doc Ring so far.

Then the rocks seemed to shake, and there was more light now, and the flat land below became a seething torrent of plunging hoofs and clashing horns. A river of steaming, heedless flesh bolted by, drowning out all other sounds, lifting a pail of dust.

There was too much dust to see more than vague masked riders pressing into the flanks of the herd. The dyke had split the stampede. It was passing on both sides. Into the flanks of it merged a small rush of other masked men, Colonel Stillman leading.

Kenny stood up, running down the slope toward a riderless horse whose dragging reins had caught under a rock. A gun sent a bullet shooshing shrilly past his head. It was Cinch Spalding, staggering on his feet, trying to get his gun up for a second shot. He fell down as Kenny looked, and Kenny shook his head, and swung on the horse and rode into the dust. Cinch Spalding had his cut of treachery and murder.

Red Wallace and his outlaws were mixed in the forefront of the stampede. Doc Ring and his men were following them. Colonel Stillman, Baldy, and a few others were after Doc Ring. With the stampede scattering out and dawn rushing in now, the showdown was near.

A man could only guess at what happened first. Kenny heard gunfire while the cattle were scattering and slowing. He passed a body. It was Hi-Low Jack Bristol, who had been with Red Wallace. Then another body, also unmasked. Steve Creel. Doc Ring had struck them by surprise and hard.

A quarter of a mile off to the left, a compact group of riders, faces masked, were riding easily. But in the dawning light, Kenny would have known the erect posture and empty sleeve of the Colonel at twice the distance.

He galloped on, knowing the Colonel was cannily waiting for the fighting to ease off ahead. There'd be fewer for those few loyal men to handle.

Kenny could have joined them, but he'd brought this about. Red Wallace and Bo Creel were ahead, and Doc Ring. There they were in the dust ahead, riders maneuvering at full gallop in two groups, guns slamming shots as the slowing stampede fanned away from them.

Even Jimp was there, his huge ebony figure hatless as he sat one of Doc Ring's fine horses. That was how Kenny spotted Doc Ring, since Jimp was keeping close to him.

He saw Doc Ring wheel toward three men, reins dropped on saddle horn, and Doc's hands each gripping a gun. All three men opened up on Doc Ring and Jimp. One man pitched off, and Doc swayed and dropped a gun. He fired again, got his man, and it was Bo Creel. But Doc was slipping from the saddle too as Jimp wrenched his horse close and scooped the slight, bowed little figure into the crook of one long, powerful arm.

The man riding at them was Red Wallace, still shooting. Jimp yanked his horse to a stop. Almost with slow dignity he slipped down with his burden, and laid it on the ground. Lead struck him and

dropped him kneeling, still trying to protect Doc Ring.

In the chill gray dawn, Jimp knelt by Doc Ring, watching, while Red Wallace put lead in him again. Wallace was hatless. His red hair was plain. His broad, muscular face had a sneering grin of satisfaction—until Kenny hauled the handkerchief off his face and rode at him.

Then Red Wallace brought his lathered horse up rearing. He was thumbing cartridges into his smoking gun as the horse came down.

A gun blasted once, and when Kenny looked, Jimp was holding Doc Ring in a sitting position. Doc Ring had fired that one shot, and hit Red Wallace's horse. Doc's mouth was bloody, his thin face had a death's grin as Jimp held him there, and the horse fell. Red Wallace was leaping clear, trapped in the open. Bob Kenny came on.

Doc Ring had done it. A kind of frenzy seized Red Wallace. He pumped shots at Kenny, and ran off to one side, reloading as he dropped to a knee. Kenny hit the ground, running, not a hundred yards away. He walked forward.

"You yellow, Red?" Kenny called, walking forward.

Red bawled at him, "Yellow, damn you? This time I'll get you!"

Kenny was grinning. This was the way it should have been, that roundup day before the drive started. Now Red had it, no help, no tricks.

"You won't see the Pecos, Red!"

Red shot at him, and shot again, and paused to steady himself. Then Kenny, pacing evenly, opened fire. It was the kind of thing to break a man's unsteady nerve. Red broke. He was jumping to one side when Kenny's shot knocked him spinning, and the next shot caught him.

Kenny stopped there, knowing the sodden fall of a dying man. He waited a moment. The stampede was rumbling across the plain. A few riders, a very few, were carrying on the running fight. When Kenny looked back, Jimp had fallen across the slight, lead-riddled body of Doc Ring, and far back through the clearing dust, the small, compact body of riders was coming easily on, Colonel Stillman commanding.

Kenny smiled a little. There'd be work in gathering cattle and reaching the Pecos, but the grass would be long and green up north, where the 5X would settle.

And tonight there would be a camp fire, as Carol had promised. Kenny stood a moment, rolling a cigarette, hardly thinking. His gaze was on the butte, miles off in the southwest, and he was smiling. They would see the Pecos together; they had sense enough now to know what they wanted, and they would have it—Colonel Stillman's daughter commanding. Kenny chuckled and started toward his horse.

One of the most fantastic projects ever begun in the West, never noted for lack of imaginative enterprise, was the projected tunnel through the Sierra mountain range, to bring afternoon sunlight into Virginia City, when that mining camp was at its boomingest. The idea was to encourage general business and cut into the hell-raising night-life of the town. The tunnel was to have been two-and-some miles long, the sunlight to be carried through it by several banks of large mirrors.

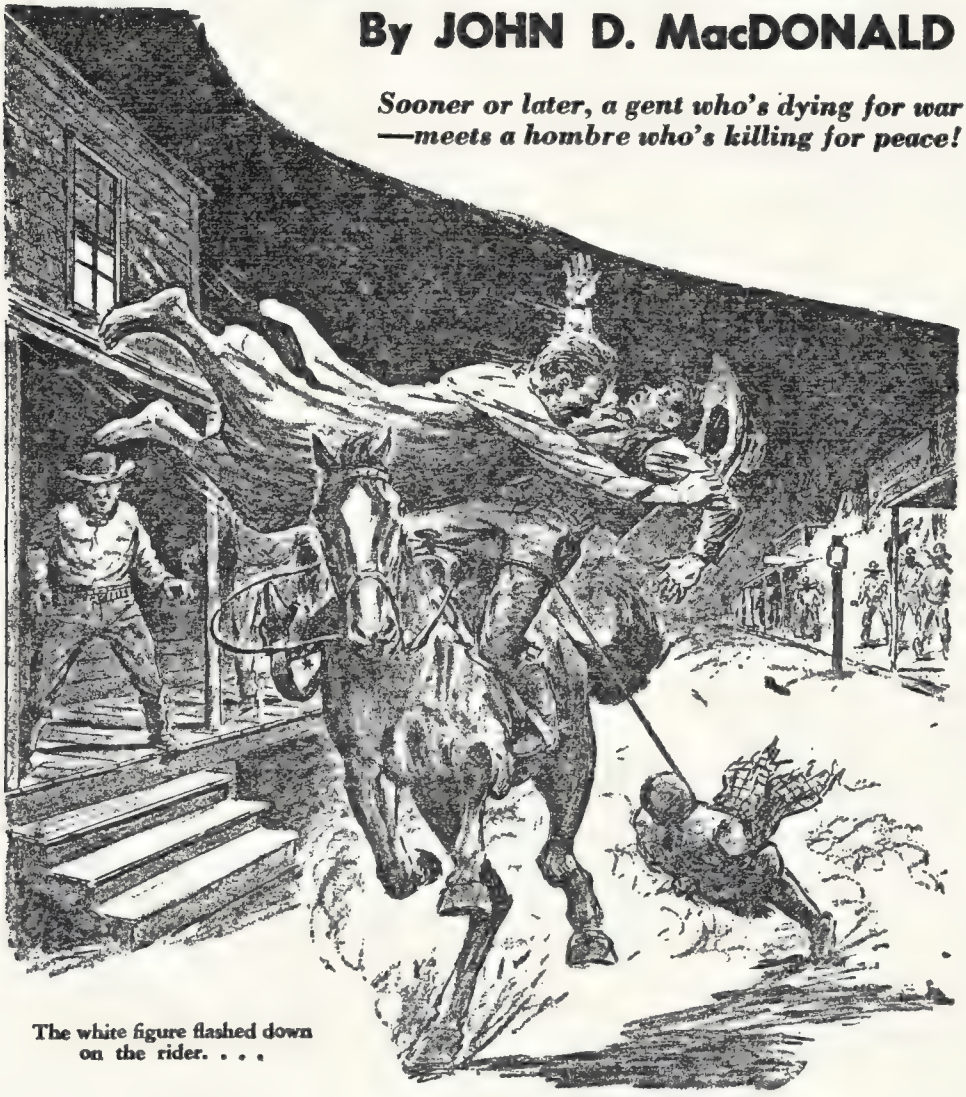
Work had begun on the project, when the businessmen came to guns over how much each would have to pay for the benefits of old Sol!

—John Barrett

Hang the Man High!

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

Sooner or later, a gent who's dying for war —meets a hombre who's killing for peace!



The white figure flashed down on the rider. . . .

CHUB, who had set himself up as carpenter and wheelwright in town after a big sorrel out at the Lazy Anchor had crushed him against the corral fence, looked up from the pins he was whittling for the cracked tree when the shadow darkened his doorway. He saw that it was the white-faced man who had come in on the stage two days before with more trunks than any man should carry around with himself.

"Somethin'?" Chub asked, politely enough. He had heard that this new one had an accent like nothing ever heard in Chambers before.

"You are carpenter?" the man said in a thick foreign accent. His face was broad and white, with heavy bones, and

he had a straight, humorless mouth. Chub noticed that the pale hands were thick and that the man carried himself very straight.

"They keep telling me I'm a carpenter, friend. What would you want?"

"I want wooden woman."

That was when Chub dropped the pin he was working on and gave himself a shallow cut across the back of the thumb.

"You want a what?" he asked loudly.

"Wooden womans. For to put on dresses in the window my store."

Chub got up and limped over to the windowsill and got his pipe. He said, "Now let me get this straight, friend. You have a store?"

"Today I get it. With window. I paint my sign. Want womans in the window. For cloths."

Chub grinned as the great light dawned. "You want a dress dummy! And that's what all those trunks are for. You're opening a store." The man nodded stolidly. Chub asked, "What kind of woman? You want a face on her? Don't think I'd be so good making a face out of wood."

"No face. Can you do?"

"I'll try it, friend. What's your name?"

"Wadic. I am from Boston. I work in store there, save money, buy cloths, come here where there is no store."

"Yep. The womenfolk take the stage to Larabee when they need dress goods."

"When is wooden womans done?"

"Say a week. You rented Hartell's place?"

"From his widow."

"Yep. Charlie wasn't making enough out of feed and he tried palming an ace to help out. When Dee caught him at it, old Charlie lost his head and grabbed for his knife."

"I do not understand."

"Forget it. When she's done, I'll bring her around. Fifteen dollars be okay?"

"If wooden womans is good, is not too much."

A week later, the hands coming in from the nearby outfits varied the routine of years standing. Saturday night they usually spent as little time as possible getting from the saddle to the bar, but word had gone around, and they went from the saddle in a grinning group outside the window of Charlie Hartell's place and gawk at the wooden woman.

Wadic had decently draped her in a sheet, but under the bottom edge of the sheet they could see the pine ankles that Chub had carved. Chub, with sturdy ideas of womanhood, had made the ankles staunch enough to match the rather ripe outlines of the rest of her. Wadic had asked for a little extra planing here and there.

It was at that unfortunate hour, just before sunset on a Saturday night, that Wadic climbed into the window from the dark interior of the store. Most of the Lazy Anchor bunch were there, all the way from Redneck George, the slab-handed foreman, to little Tad Morgan, a hundred and ten pounds of cured leather.

Wadic gave them one incurious glance through the glass. His compressed lips held a glittering array of pins. He carried a thick fold of material over his arm. He slung it over the shoulder of the wooden woman, shaking out the folds of it. The hands nudged each other and cackled in glee.

"Seems downright indecent," Tad said firmly.

With the material covering her charms, Wadic snatched out the sheet, began busily draping and pinning the material.

"Full grown man, too," Redneck George said. "Or, on the other hand, is he? Look how he keeps that little finger bent."

Wadic pinned and adjusted and gathered folds in the material. He wore a shiny blue serge suit. After each few pins he stepped back one pace, cocked his head on the side and examined the dummy.

The last sunlight had faded when he was through. The wooden woman stood, resplendent in the dress of rich material. Only when he stepped out of the window did the group move off to the Ace High to talk it over at the bar.

John Cowl, lean young half-owner of the Diamond C spread, stood at the end of the bar and listened glumly to the general conversation. Cowl was a silent young man with a local reputation for stepping in on the side of the underdog.

The bar echoed with a chorus of resentment about the "furriner," this Wadic who had dared invade Chambers with his foreign ways, his wooden woman, his mouth full of pins and his bent little finger.

Loomis, the fat-chested hand from the Running Moon, slapped a heavy paw against the bar and said, "Like as not our womenfolk'll be going there and then he'll be draping them up with his fancy cloth the same way he draped up that dummy." Nobody remarked that not only did Loomis have no womenfolk, but that he didn't have a chance of having any unless some girls with pretty strong stomachs floated into town.

His words brought a low roar of disapproval. Jake, behind the bar, said mildly, "My old lady bought some cloth off of him yesterday. Took her two hours to make up her mind. Cost me eleven dollars before she got through."

Redneck roared, "There's no place in Chambers for that one."

After the per-capita average of drinks consumed had reached the neighborhood of five, the crowd had gotten away from the angry, muttering phase and were entering into the planning phase.

"We ought to be able to show him somehow," Loomis bellowed. "Damn furriner, coming in to mess up our town, gettin' the women all gaga over his fancy cloth. Like as not he stole the stuff in the first place."

Dee came wandering over from the poker table. Loomis turned on him and said, "You started this by shooting Charlie. If you'd just winged him a little instead of blowing half his head off, this Wadic wouldn't have found an empty store in town."

"Shut up, Loomis," Dee said mildly.

Loomis was about to make an angry retort when sudden silence filled the room. Wadic pushed through the swinging doors, an uncertain smile on his face.

"Good evening," he said.

NOBODY answered except John Cowl. The others glared at John. Wadic, with timid haste, made his way to Cowl's side, made a fluttery gesture at Jake behind the bar and asked softly, "Wine have you?"

Jake gave him a long, cool look, reached under the backbar, pulled out a dusty bottle, yanked the cork, set the bottle and a shot glass in front of Wadic.

Wadic smelled it, frowned slightly and said, "It is bad." Jake said nothing. The men at the bar said nothing. Wadic gave them a shy smile, poured wine in the shot glass and sipped it.

Redneck nudged Tad. Every man at the bar picked up his drink and sipped it delicately, little finger extended. Wadic did not seem to notice. He turned to John Cowl and said, "I am new here, you know. I want to be friends with the men in this city. My store is here. I live here maybe the rest of my life."

"Maybe short life," Loomis said wryly. The roar of laughter startled Wadic so that a bit of wine splashed onto his sleeve. He took out a pure white handkerchief and dabbed at the spot.

"Hey, let me do that for you," Loomis said. He unknotted his bandanna, walked spraddle-legged over to Wadic, dabbed vigorously at the spot.

"Thank you very much," Wadic said politely.

Loomis mopped the sleeve and up the arm and across the shoulder. The bandanna masked his fist. Almost delicately he mopped at Wadic's mouth. Wadic bounced back against the bar, stumbled and sat down, blood running from the corner of his mouth.

He had a confused, pained expression on his face. He got up slowly and said, "But I do not understand. . . ."

Loomis, encouraged by the roar of approval behind him, put a little more weight in the next blow. This time Wadic did not fall. He clung to the bar, his eyes faintly glazed.

A hard, sunbaked fist slanted over Wadic's shoulder and hit Loomis in the mouth with the sound of a wet hand slapping saddle leather. Loomis' well-filled jeans bounced smartly off the wooden floor.

In the sudden silence John Cowl said, "You want to fight a man, say so. Don't play with him."

They all wanted to fight Wadic. John Cowl glanced down the bar and singled out a hand from the Running Moon named Jester.

Cowl said, "Only one man fights him. That's you, Jester."

Wadic gave Cowl a look of bewilderment. He had stopped the flow of blood. His eyes were no longer glazed. "Why is fighting?" Wadic asked.

"It's the custom for strangers here," Cowl said dryly.

"With fists, yes? American way?" Wadic asked.

"That's right."

"Is necessary?"

Cowl nodded. "I'm afraid so, Mr. Wadic."

"Get out there and fight," Redneck said, pushing Wadic roughly. Loomis sat over in a far corner, fingering his teeth.

Wadic held both clenched fists out in front of him and shut his eyes. Jester walked in and knocked him down. Wadic got up quickly and assumed the same pose. Jester brought one up from the floor and knocked him down again. Wadic got up, a bit more slowly and painfully. He tried to keep his eyes open. He hit weakly at Jester, missed him, caught a rock-hard fist in the eye and went flat.

After they had thrown water on him, Wadic stirred feebly, opened his eyes and said, "Is over?"

"Is over, boy," John Cowl said. He helped him to his feet. Wadic's face was a crumpled mask.

"And get out of town, you damn furriner!" Redneck yelled into his face.

"Shut up," John Cowl said wearily. Wadic walked like a drunken man, his weight on Cowl. Cowl left with him, came back ten minutes later.

"What did you do with him, Sir Lancelot?" Tad asked nastily.

"Showed him how to find his bed. He's no coward, that one."

"You're always the one for feeding homeless dogs," Jake said.

John Cowl had no more stomach for liquor. He had stabled his horse and had taken a room at the Chambers House.

His room looked out over the wide night street, deserted except for the horses tied at the rail in front of the Ace High.

The loud crash and the whooping awakened him. He walked in his underwear to the window and saw immediately what had happened. Redneck and the boys, fired by liquor, had broken the window of Wadic's place. Redneck had dropped a loop over the wooden woman. The drunken hands were hooting with laughter as Redneck raced his pony up and down the street.

Behind the galloping horse, the wooden woman was quickly becoming a useless lump of wood.

John Cowl gasped as he saw, diagonally across the street, the figure of Wadic standing with a nightgown flapping around his ankles, on top of the store

front, silently watching Redneck ride.

Redneck turned for the second time to come galloping down the road. John Cowl saw Wadic crouch and balance on the balls of his feet.

The white figure flashed down and then the riderless horse was galloping down the street, the wooden woman bounding along at the end of the riata. The two figures struggled in the dust. John Cowl cursed, struggled into his pants, shoved his arms in his shirt and, snatching his gunbelt from the back of the wooden chair, ran barefoot down through the narrow lobby and out into the street.

They had gathered around the two. As John Cowl shouldered his way through the mob, he heard the thin scream of pain, the bitter crack of a breaking bone.

Both men bounded up. Redneck's beefy arm hung limp and useless. He cursed deep in his throat and threw his fist at Wadic's face. Wadic's face didn't stay put. It moved down under the blow, with one of the thick, white hands clamping Redneck's big wrist, the other hand grasping Redneck's elbow. Wadic reversed his hands violently and the bone snapped like a dry twig.

John Cowl saw Tad snatch at his gun. John rammed his own gunbarrel into the small of Tad's back and said, "Bad idea, Tad." Tad stiffened.

Redneck was roaring with futile rage and pain. Loomis launched himself at Wadic, striking a tremendous blow. Wadic moved back with the blow, grabbed Loomis' fist with both hands, turned, wedged his shoulder in Loomis' armpit and levered the big arm down. Loomis flew completely through the broken window and crashed heavily somewhere inside the shop.

There was a sudden, awed silence. Wadic, his bruised lips barely moving, said, "This time fight my way. You make Stanislau Wadic angry."

One of his eyes was swollen shut. He swung his head back and forth, peering at the rest of them with his good eye. Then he said, "Man in my store has big mouth. I got needle. Go in now and sew up that big mouth. Surprise to him when he wakes up."

He turned and walked with odd dignity to his doorway. John Cowl caught him at the door. He said, "Hey, you can't do that to Loomis! No, Stanislau."

Wadic shrugged. "Ho! Maybe is not good idea."

Tad had moved out to the side. The light from across the street glittered on gunbarrel steel. Tad said in a husky, dangerous whisper, "Okay, furriner. Let's see you dance."

The gun slammed a lance of flame at Wadic's bare feet. The slug hit, whined back against the store front, raising a puff of dust.

Wadic sighed as though very tired. "Dance? You want to kill Stanislau Wadic, you kill him. No dance. Is not dignity."

He stood with his hands at his sides. Tad slowly raised his sights. John Cowl stopped breathing.

It was at the point that Loomis came walking heavily out of the store. The whole side of his face was scraped.

He peered at Wadic. He said mildly, "Mister, put on your pants and come across the street. I'm buying you a drink."

The tension broke. They shouldered around Wadic and slapped his shoulders, and somebody sent for the doc to set Redneck's arms.

By the time Wadic arrived in the Ace High he was already becoming a minor legend. He stood next to John Cowl at the bar. He raised the shotglass of whiskey, his little finger crooked. He sipped it and shuddered.

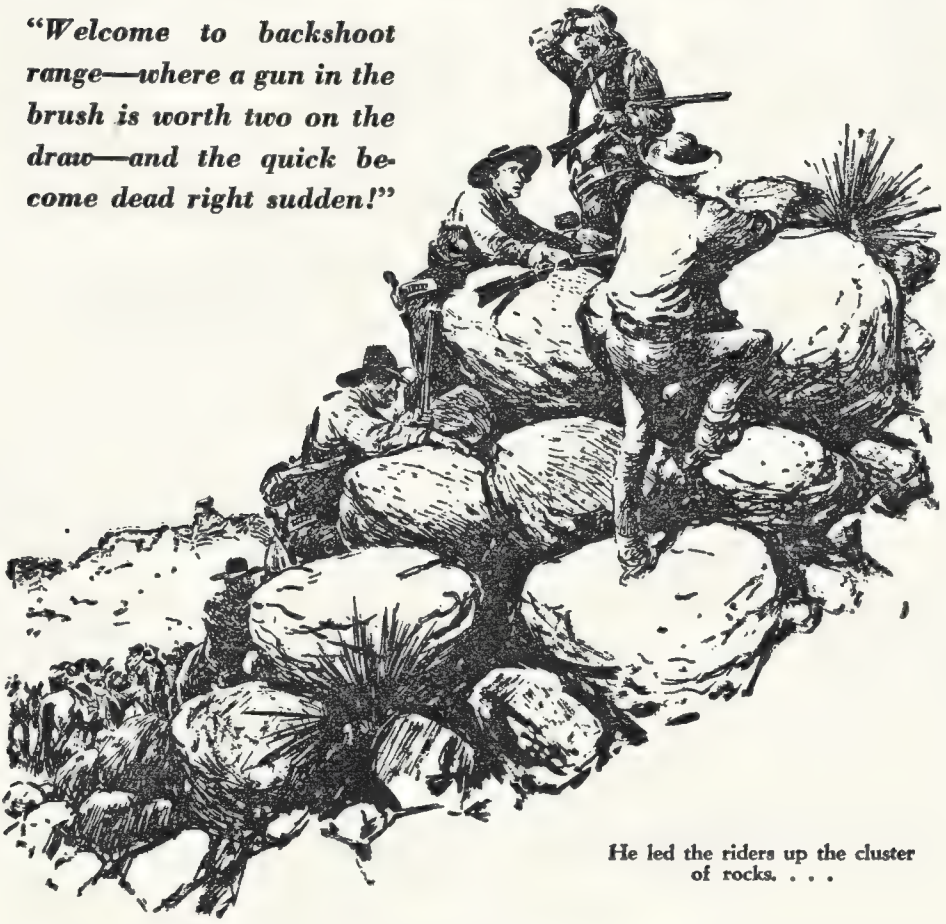
He smiled shyly at John Cowl. He said, "Is funny city here. I think I like."

John grinned at him. "I suspect the feeling is mutual," he said.

The LAST BULLET

By WILLIAM HOPSON

"Welcome to backshoot range—where a gun in the brush is worth two on the draw—and the quick become dead right sudden!"



He led the riders up the cluster of rocks. . . .

THE trail had led him on a zig-zag course of more than seven hundred miles, westward from the territory of New Mexico into Arizona and on to Holbrook. Here his man had holed up for a couple of days, gone on another crazy spree, and lit out again. Dalhart had followed patiently from cow camp to ranch, across the Colorado River, had pushed on through the Mogollons, and finally had come out into the wastes of the great southwestern desert. It looked as though his quarry was heading for Old Mexico.

He thought, *the crazy fool, he'll end up with his back to a 'dobie wall down there someplace,* and shifted his gaunt frame in the saddle. The pack horse blew a slobbering sneeze to dust its dry nostrils, and Dalhart made out the outlines of adobe buildings and a big, circular adobe corral down there beneath the green belt of towering cottonwoods.

He was catching up again after a false trail had lost him two days of precious time, and he hoped that Joe had stopped over here to rest up his horse. *I've got to catch up,* he thought again, for the hundredth time. *I've got to overhaul him before he gets into Old Mexico.* He savored the bitterness of it now as he had savored it by day, when he rode, and at night, when he lay on his back and listened to the mournful, spine-chilling howl of the far-ranging lobo wolves.

The settlement numbered about fifteen or twenty adobe buildings, three of which comprised a small store, a saloon on a corner, and, beyond the saloon, the big, circular adobe corral with a windmill in the center. Dalhart racked his sorrel in front of the saloon, beside a flea-bitten roan, and swung stiffly to the ground. He was a tired-looking man in his thirties, with a long, drooping black mustache beneath a pair of dark eyes set above two high cheek bones. When he removed the pointed crown hat to wipe at his forehead with a sleeve and then dust himself, his damply plastered hair showed that he was beginning to bald.

He replaced the hat, glanced absently at his key-winding watch, noted that it was ten minutes past three, and put it away again. Stale beer smell smote his nostrils as he entered the saloon, and he caught the studied carelessness of a half dozen glances that searched him over and flicked on through the open doorway to the two horses, one carrying a light pack. They were probing for the bright pentacle on his shirt pocket, the reward poster with his picture on it, the man or men he was fleeing from, or the man he was hunting.

From back of the bar, a man came limping its ten-foot length, a club foot making shuffling sounds in the momentary silence. Back of him, reposing in a sheet-iron tank of water fed by a windmill pipe thrust through the wall, was a wooden beer keg. He said, "Howdy, the name is Limpy on account of this foot. The beer ain't either cold or warm, just middlin'. There's whiskey, plus tequila and mezcal smuggled from across the border."

"The name is Virgil Dalhart, and I'll try the beer," Dalhart replied.

Better to tell them his name, he thought. It meant nothing in this section of the Arizona territory, and it might help to halt suspicion. He paid for the big goblet of foamy liquid and sipped at it slowly, savoring the taste against the dry, bitter taste that had been in his mouth since he'd undertaken this job. He let his back rest against the bar and surveyed the four playing dominoes at a table, the woman in particular.

She was in her late thirties or early forties, he guessed; a bull of a coarse-faced woman weighing perhaps one-seventy or seventy-five. She wore cowmen's boots, and her big hips were encased in a split riding skirt of some coarse material that looked like light canvas duck, and a man's shirt, blue and faded, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Her forearms, brown from exposure to wind and sun, were as big and as hard as a man's. On her head was a big brown hat, pinched high into a "Montana" crown.

She slapped down a domino with hoarse-voiced glee, and a prosperous looking rancher marked her down for a fifteen count.

"That's Big Kate," Limpy explained "She runs the hoss corral here. Buys, sells, trades. She can outride and outshoot any man in the territory. She's killed two men—includin' her late husband."

Dalhart sipped at the beer. Limpy said, "You come a long ways today," when there was no reply.

"About fifty miles."

"Lookin' for work?"

Dalhart shrugged. The shrug could have meant anything. Limpy said, "You might talk to Merritt there, sittin' on Kate's left. He owns the Slash M, down

on the Santa Cruz. He's short a hand. One of his boys got cut up from a knife in here last night. Some young feller that blowed in here a couple days ago. He blowed out again, 'bout noon today. Guess he figured it was the healthy thing to do."

Dalhart thought fleetingly, *Yes, that would be the healthy thing for Joe to do.* It was what Joe did best. The same as at Holbrook and a couple of other places—get crazy drunk, get into trouble, and then run for it again. That's what had started the whole crazy pattern. Just a couple of friendly beers, then a few drinks of whiskey that always turned him loco, and then the mad idea of sticking up the bank and blowing away from a small town and the friends who bored him.

Dalhart couldn't believe that the murder had been deliberate. He had told himself over and over again that, even when loco from drink, Joe hadn't done it on purpose. The gun had probably gone off accidently. But Johnson, the cashier, was dead, and there was a one thousand dollar blood bounty on Joe's head, and still he hadn't caught up with the fugitive. It had just really begun now, and Virgil Dalhart sipped at the beer and wondered where it would end. Only one thing was certain: he would stay on Joe's mad trail of trouble until that reward was collected.

"About this handy man with a knife," he said to Limpy. "Was he blonde and slim and kind of wiry, and always with a good-natured grin until he got a few drinks under his belt?"

He weighed the silence until the scrape of chairs came from the domino table. The game had ended in mid-air. Limpy said, "That's him, mister. What did he do?"

"Stuck up a bank," Dalhart answered briefly.

The man who had been sitting at Big Kate's right, playing partners with Merritt, the cattleman, moved in on Dalhart, followed by Big Kate's partner. Dalhart recognized in the seedy clothes and run down boots the shiftless type that worked only enough to obtain sufficient funds with which to loaf, pitch horseshoes, and talk loud. He didn't like the two punchers or anything about them; he liked the coarse-faced woman still less. For the sudden greed was there, the inner, bursting desire for quick money. The bloodhounds had smelled the scent.

"I'm Cal Payson," the other man said, self-importance riding the words. "How much bounty is that feller packin' on his scalp?"

Dalhart shrugged his gaunt-framed shrug, his taciturn face impassively cold. He said, briefly, "Perhaps none at all."

"Ah! That means it's big! And he blowed outa here less than three hours ago when he got scared some of Merritt's boys might show and square up for that cuttin' fracas last night. Roy," he said to his companion, "we can ketch him!"

"He's got one man to his credit now," Dalhart returned coldly. "And he's a dead shot with a rifle."

"So am I, mister. You the law?"

"I'm looking for him," was the quiet reply.

The man Roy said, sneeringly, "Hardcase, eh?" and dropped his hand to his pistol.

DALHART caught the brief blur of Big Kate's right hand, heard the hard smacking sound of it against Roy's mouth, felt the jar of the man's body as it hit the floor and rolled over twice.

"Let's not go gettin' excited," she said. The gun, undrawn, had fallen out of the sheath. She sent it skidding across the hard-packed dirt floor with the kick of a booted foot.

Merritt, the cattleman, interposed. "You'll have to excuse the boys, mister. You see, about a month back, Cal and Roy got suspicious of a stranger that came in

here and tried to trade a couple of horses to Big Kate. He didn't have bills of sale for them and they picked him up on a hunch. They collected a hundred dollars for him in Tucson and it's sorta whetted their appetites for more."

"So I noticed," Dalhart said and asked Big Kate, "This man Limpy says you trade horses. Can you let me have a good one as soon as I get a bite to eat? I had breakfast before daybreak."

"Goin' right after him, huh?" she said thoughtfully, and rubbed one side of her big nose with a man-sized thumb. "Sure, I'll loan you a horse. You leave your'n here for security. But he's probably across the Mexican border and in Sonora by now. It's only twenty-five miles away."

Then, as an afterthought, she added, "That's a lot of money fer pore folks like us . . . an' he wa'nt a day over eighteen. Not dry in the seat of his britches."

"Seventeen," Dalhart corrected, and thought, *You damned greedy sow!* He remembered that she had killed two men, this coarse-faced woman with the iron fists.

He got away from them presently, the sickness and disgust still roiling inside of him, and walked a hundred yards' distance to a small adobe cabin where a middle-aged Mexican widow eked out a meager living by feeding itinerant riders. She served him *tortillas* and beans, and added squash and fresh corn from a small garden plot back of the tiny house.

He ate rapidly and paid her, leaving the sound of her humble thanks behind, and returned to his horses, a growing impatience tugging at him. Limpy was gone from the saloon. It was deserted except for an aged, toothless graybeard, who was helping himself to a drink back of the bar.

"Where's Limpy?" Dalhart asked sharply.

"Limpy only makes ten dollars a week workin' in here, an' he kin still ride with that club foot," the old man said, and let go a cackle at his own sharp wit. "Used to be a cowpuncher, 'til a hoss rolled over on him one day, three or four year back."

First the two men, Payson and Roy, now Limpy the bartender. Dalhart led his mounts over to the gate of the 'dobe corral, let them inside, closed the gate, and then he saw Big Kate come out of the small adobe building beside the harness and saddle shed. She strode toward a saddled horse, a repeating Winchester in a gloved hand. Around her ample hips lay a cartridge belt holding a sagging gun sheath. There was grim determination in her coarse face as she slipped the gun into a saddle boot and swung up.

"You too, eh?" Virgil Dalhart asked.

Her face hardened, the eyes bright with the greed that lay plain. "That's a lot of money for us pore folks," she said. "Pick out any horse you want and pay me when you git back. I ain't got time. Roy and Cal have got a mile start."

He thought, *Three of them now, and she makes four,* and began unsaddling.

She lifted the reins, then paused and looked down at him. "That reward dead or alive?" the woman asked.

He said, "You won't take that kid alive, lady," and went on unsaddling.

She spurred the big gray to the gate, opened it from the saddle, rode through and closed it, and then spurred the gray into a lope. Dalhart carried his pack beneath the shed and went to the windmill with his big canteen. A slight breeze had set the fan into clanking motion, and he filled the canteen from the trickle of water pulsating out of the pipe. He roped a big, desert-bred sorrel horse and saddled swiftly. It was a race against time now. The wolf pack was in full cry; gone mad, blood-lust mad. If he didn't get there first, somebody was going to get killed. He knew that wild, crazy kid too well. Seventeen years old and heading into the Mexican desert and a destiny that only God knew.

He left the corral and the hamlet behind and let the sorrel out in a long, swinging lope.

A mile and a half out on the flat, greasewood-studded wastes, he saw two riders heading southward, and he could tell from the manner in which they rode that they were following an easy trail in the soft sand. In between, the figure of Big Kate's gray horse threw up a small dust cloud as the woman rode hard to overtake the others. Dalhart swung to the east and began a long, encircling ride calculated to bring him in ahead of the others, and a silent prayer went up from the gaunt-faced older man that the kid would swing away from the Sierra Madres and cut deeper into Sonora or Chihuahua. Cochise, the Chiricahua chieftain, was in the midst of his bloody eight-year war against the whites and the Mother Mountains down there in the distance were crawling with the dark-faced, murderous devils. If that fool kid struck in there, they'd have him in a flash, hanging upside down by the heels while his brains slowly cooked over a small fire and popped out of his skull.

Nine miles south of the settlement, among the cottonwoods, another green belt came into view, and Dalhart paused just long enough to let the sorrel drink from the trickle of water. He splashed on through and pulled up in front of a small ranch house. A dog bayed his presence and a woman came to the door, a rifle dangling from one hand. He touched his hatbrim.

He said, "Howdy, ma'am. Did a boy of seventeen come by here within the past three hours?"

"Land sakes, yes!" she cried out. "He bought some jerky from me. Said he left town in too big a hurry to git some grub. I told him to go back, that the Apaches are reported out, but he just laughed. What did he do?"

News was scarce and she was hungry for something to pass on to the neighbors. He said, "Got in trouble with the law, ma'am," touched his hatbrim, and rode on.

He crossed the Mexican border over into Sonora late that afternoon. To the west of him the Oro Blanco—White Gold—mountains hunched their rocky crests above the dry floor of the desert, like the scales on the smooth back of a giant iguana. He had not seen the two men and Big Kate in nearly an hour.

Fifteen minutes later, he received the answer in the flat report of a rifle, and half felt, half sensed the path of Big Kate's bullet past his face. He wheeled the sorrel and forced a grunt of pain out of it as the spurs went in deep, slamming it toward the lip of an arroyo fifty yards away. Dust spurts from her rifle threw themselves up around the horse, and the voices of two more rifles cut in.

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The stupid fools were shooting at his horse, trying to put him afoot in the desert in their greed to get that reward money that was on Joe's head!

He shot the running sorrel over the lip of the arroyo and down below the protection of its banks and pulled up, cold anger chilling his body. He bent in the saddle and pulled the .44-40 caliber repeater from its boot.

"All right, gentlemen and you too, lady," he said savagely. "If you want to play hide-and-go-seek, then we'll play hide-and-go-seek!"

He began a slow approach down the sandy bed of the arroyo, cursing the stupidity of people who would use a rifle in Apache country. He let the knotted reins lay on the neck of the sorrel, the flat hammer of the repeater far back under one thumb. He cut a quarter of a mile circle and then dismounted and crawled to the top of a rocky ridge. The three riders were a mile and a half away, riding hard

Form somewhere close by came the sound of hoofs striking rocks, and Dalhart spun with the repeater half way to his shoulder. He lowered it and waited as Limpy and Merritt rode up, then, tight lipped, went to his horse and mounted. His somber gaze met that of the cattleman.

"Even you, too?" he asked, softly. "And he's only a seventeen-year-old kid."

Merritt looked uncomfortable. "You got it all wrong, mister. I'm just a law-abiding man who wants to do my share to—"

"I hate a liar worse than poison," Dalhart cut in. "I've often wondered what there is in men's souls that makes them turn into bloodhounds when the scent of blood money can be smelled."

Limpy let go a hard laugh. He too was gunbelted and armed with a rifle. His club foot rested in a special stirrup of the saddle. "What about you, mister?" he jeered, and laughed again.

"That kid's my half brother," came the harsh reply.

"And you're out to collect it," Merritt sneered. "And you talk to me about blood money! Pah!"

"This ain't gettin' us nowhere at all," Limpy reasoned, twisting his deformed foot free of the stirrup. "While we're sittin' here jawin', them three up ahead are makin' more tracks. There's a waterhole a few miles ahead. That's where he's headin' to make camp, and they'll have him if we don't get goin'. I've come too far to lose out now."

DALHART booted the rifle, spurred on past them and took up the pursuit. They fell in behind and tried to keep up. The line fell behind as they drove on southward, and the sun swung over toward the western horizon. The three ahead had disappeared again At regular intervals, Dalhart hauled up to let his horse blow and the others stopped too. He looked at the distant skyline and felt that constriction get all the tighter, deep down in his midriff.

He wanted to go back, back as fast as that sorrel horse could get him over the border, but he couldn't, because somewhere up ahead that crazy kid had three blood-mad bounty hunters spurring hard on his trail. Joe needed him. Joe would need him more.

Dalhart hadn't seen much; nothing during the past hour. That last had been but a brief flash of a distant head wrapped in a red turban. No smoke signals, but he knew. They were out there, pacing them, keeping off the skyline, biding their time. They might be some of old Cochise's warriors, going on, or coming from, a raid into Sonora, or one of the bands from the hazy slopes of the distant Sierra Madres

Not that it mattered very much. They were out there. That was what did matter. All because of a crazy kid who had gone loco and held up a bank and killed a man.

One man was already dead. How many more would die? He put the thought behind him and drove forward, Merritt and Limpy bringing up the rear. Ahead of them, the terrain dipped down into a wide swale a quarter of a mile across, and it was here that the raiders made their strike.

Dalhart heard Limpy's yell of warning and turned in the saddle.. They were coming in from two sides and a little to the rear, about thirty of them in two groups; lean, black-faced creatures with streaks of white painted under the eyes and across the bridges of the thin, sharp noses; hounds of the desert in full cry. Dalhart drove in the spurs and felt the surge of the big sorrel as it lengthened its stride and broke into a dead run. He jerked the .44-40 from its boot and twisted in the saddle, levering five shots as fast as he could jack the shells into the firing chamber. He heard the boom of muzzle-loading smooth bores and the swish of flying arrows. The sorrel was pulling out ahead of the others now, and Dalhart jerked at the loops in his belt, refilling the magazine.

When he looked around again, Limpy's horse was down, two hundred and fifty yards to the rear. Dalhart caught a brief glimpse of the club footed man trying to run, of a fierce-visaged warrior spurring in with long lance poised, then all was obscured in dust as two warriors fought over the dead man's guns and cartridge belt.

Dalhart lowered the hot rifle and went to his belt loops again. Merritt, his face a mask of sheer terror, had forgotten his rifle and strove only to catch up. The warriors had sheered off out of range, three horses down from Dalhart's two emptied magazines. He slowed and let the other catch up.

"What kind of a gun was Limpy carrying?" he called out.

"A forty-five-seventy single shot, I think," panted back Merritt.

"That's what I was afraid of."

"What now?" cried out the rancher.

Yes, what now? Dalhart thought bitterly, and slowed the heaving sorrel down to a walk. Six hundred yards on each side of them, well out of effective range of the .44-40, the turbanned riders kept pace.

Merritt said, "They've cut us off from that waterhole. They'll send up smoke signals and get more help."

"I doubt it," Dalhart said, voicing a conviction he did not feel. "There's about thirty of them, and they'd lose face."

The swale widened and the sun went on down toward the horizon. It would not be dark until about eight-thirty. The horses were tiring badly now and getting thirsty. Dalhart scanned the horizon and saw that the raiders had disappeared. They simply had vanished, as only Apaches could do.

"Maybe they've gone," Merritt said hopefully.

He knew better. He had lived too long in this country. Dalhart thought, *he's scared, he'll go to pieces when they close in,* and set the lathered sorrel into a lope. A mile further on, they rounded a rocky promontory and came suddenly upon four horses. Big Kate and Cal Payson and Roy sat on rocks, laughing and smoking. On the ground, bound hand and foot, lay Joe. He was grinning like a young gargoyle.

"Hi, old timer," he greeted. "They snuck up on me while I was takin' a nap."

The repeating rifle in Big Kate's hands swivelled, the muzzle in line with Dalhart's chest as he swung down. She said, "I missed you this e'nin, mister, but I won't this time. Keep your hands off."

He ignored her and strode over and bent down over Joe. "Cut me loose an' gimme a gun, Virge," Joe laughed up at him. "I'll make these two-bit bounty hunters hit for the tall timber. Say, how much am I worth anyhow?"

"It doesn't matter. They won't collect."

"No?" Payson asked belligerently. "Maybe you think you're going to beat us out of it."

"Look! Merritt cried out hoarsely, pointing.

A half-strangled sound came from between the puffed and swollen lips of Roy. He jumped to his feet, the triumphant laughter gone now. His face had changed color.

"My God!" he got out in a whisper. " 'Paches!"

There were only three of them. One far up ahead of them, another standing dismounted on a rocky promontory six hundred yards to the west, a third out of rifle range behind them. None showed on the ridge back of which lay the waterhole. Dalhart straightened and closed the jackknife and Joe got to his feet.

Big Kate said, "You dirty little snotty nosed sneak thief! You got us into this!"

Dalhart caught the barrel of the rifle in time and wrenched it out of the woman's hands. Payson wheeled on him suddenly. "Where's Limpy?" he half yelled, the blood gone from his flushed face. He had been drinking.

Merrit wiped his own face with a trembling hand. "His horse went down a few miles back when they tied into us. They lanced him."

Dalhart handed the rifle back to the woman. "We'll need every gun in this outfit, lady. Come on—let's get out of here."

"Where? Our horses are run down and thirsty. Theirs ain't."

They swung up into leather. Dalhart led off. They followed him without question. With fresh horses, they might make a running fight northward toward the border. That was out of the question for a few hours. It would be best to wait until some time during the night and try to get through.

South of them a half mile or so, the swale widened out, its dry, flat surface marred by a big cluster of volcanic rocks. They jogged toward the cluster, five men and a big, coarse-faced woman. Then a wild cry, shrill like the faint call of a distant animal, floated to their ears from the sentinel to the west and the distant ridges took on sudden life.

Dalhart spurred the tired sorrel into a run, the drumming hoof beats of the others close behind. They made the cluster of rocks, led the horses up close, and then climbed to the top.

Joe came over and sat down, rolling a cigarette. "How'd Mom take it?" he asked.

"About like Lon's wife and kids," Dalhart answered. His somber eyes looked off into the distance. They were out in plain sight now.

"I guess I really fixed things up, didn't I, Virge? But them men in the saloon shouldn'ta dared me to do it. Then Lon told me I was drunk and to go on home and he grabbed the barrel of my gun. It went off."

Merritt came over and sat down, wiping his face with his hand. "What do you think?" he asked.

"They'll probably wait until dark or just before daybreak. Some have superstitions that the ghosts of their dead walk at night and mustn't be disturbed. Better go down one at a time and share your water with the horses."

"I ain't got any," Roy said. "I lost my canteen someplace. I been sharin' Cal's and it's about empty."

DARKNESS began to close in. They sat and ate jerky beef and waited. There was nothing else to do. There were small fires now in the night, the animal calls coming clearly. But no fires to the east, where the waterhole lay, just beyond a low, rocky ridge. Payson finished off the water in his canteen. It fell with an empty, rattling sound.

"Listen!" called Dalhart, rising.

The sound came from the south. It grew in volume, came nearer, and swept past in a rolling roar of hoofs that turned

the swale into dusty thunder. Dalhart lowered the rifle and automatically began extracting shells from his belt loops. He peered down among the rocks and it wasn't too dark to see. The horses had been swept away in the stampede, the sound growing fainter in the night.

Big Kate began to curse; solid man-oaths with just a touch of shrillness in them. "Somebody come pull this dam' arrer outa me," she snarled.

Joe said, grinning in the darkness, "Looks like I sure got you folks in a mess, didn't I? Well, it's better than stretchin' rope. But if I had, I'd a done the same thing that gent did up in Alder Gulch, Montana, when they had it around his neck. He hollered, 'So-long, boys, I'll see you in hell,' and kicked the box out from under his own self. That's what I'da done. Give 'em a good show."

Dalhart slapped him across the mouth, savagely, and went to the woman. The shaft had gone all the way through her shoulder to the feathers. He cut it from behind with his knife and pulled it out.

"Hope it's not poison," she grunted. "They sometimes dip 'em in rotted deer livers." She tucked at a wisp of her coarse, graying hair and grunted again.

Merritt said absently, to no one in particular, "I should have known better. But I'm mortgaged to the hilt and sunk from gambling losses. I just needed a few hundred right quick to get me over the hump."

He wiped his face again and shifted the rifle. Roy stood looking toward the east, licking his dry, swollen lips. "They think we don't know about that waterhole over there—that we'll try to head north. Even if we hold 'em off tonight, we cain't stay here tomorrow in these hot rocks. You comin', Cal?"

"I'll take my chances with the others later, but you can have my canteen."

"There'll be a moon up about midnight. So long."

They sat there waiting; a half hour, then an hour. Big Kate stirred and shifted her bandaged shoulder. "You reckon that fool made it?" she finally asked. "There's no fires over that way."

Dalhart caught the note of faint hope stirring in her voice. No, there were no fires over there on the ridge and no Indians. The waterhole was in a narrow, rocky arroyo, just beyond. Time and the hot sun poured down upon the volcanic cluster would do the rest.

Payson said, uneasily, "Maybe I shoulda gone with him. They wouldn't be expectin' anything this early."

Dalhart shifted the repeater on his lap for the dozenth time, eyes never leaving the darkness below. Big Kate began to give off faint grunts, low at first and then louder and almost with each breath. "It's that dam' . . . poisoned arrer," she got out. "It was dipped in rotten deer liver."

Suddenly she came to her feet, the six-shooter in one hand. "Where is he?" she almost screamed. "Where's that dirty little rat? He got us—"

Dalhart dropped his rifle and grabbed the gun barrel. The weapon went off, a short streak of orange flame lanced upward, the heavy report rolling down the length of the darkened swale. He wrenched it out of her hand and pushed her down and looked around. Joe was gone.

"Joe!" he called sharply.

SIX BULLETS WEST

A NOVEL By STEVE FRAZEE

DECEMBER *FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES*—OUT NOVEMBER 11TH!

"Down here," floated up from where the horses had been stampeded. "There's four of 'em lyin' around. Not bad shootin' in the dark."

"Come back here!"

Joe's reckless, boyish laugh came back in answer. "Not me, Virge! What do you think I headed in here for? They like young gents like me. I'll ride with 'em for a few months and then breeze on into Mexico."

"Joe, come back here!" Dalhart hissed down again.

There was no answer this time. It came a half hour later, some distance to the east, with Joe's first scream. Dalhart sat there, the darkness hiding what lay in his gaunt, haggard face. Then he put both hands over his ears. . . .

Dalhart rose to his feet. He said, "It's nearly midnight and the moon will be up pretty soon. We know what's going to happen if we stay here. If we can make those trees at the foot of that east ridge, we might be able to swing north and hit across the desert. It's better than staying here."

"I know," Merritt was speaking dully. "They got Limpy's forty-five seventy and all we got's these repeaters. They can bust these rocks apart at six hundred yards. I expect my wife is worried. I told her I'd be back by tonight."

Cal Payson's voice sounded oddly out of place. "If that reward was dead or alive, we could still collect on him. How much was it, Dalhart?"

Dalhart was slinging his nearly empty canteen over a shoulder. "A thousand," he said. "I'm the sheriff over home. I posted it."

"Well, I'll be damned! That's a hot one. You post a thousand county money on your own brother's head and then go out to collect it yourself!"

Dalhart said wearily, "It was my own money. I couldn't offer it to Lon's wife and kids. I gave it to the bank to post and pay to the family after I caught him."

"Well," grunted the bigger man, "he sure got caught, all right."

They went down single file, Dalhart in the lead. The floor of the desert swale met them with its sandy softness. Six hundred yards to the east lay the dark outline of the ridge. They went out, crawling on hands and knees. Big Kate's large teeth were clamped hard on a soft bullet to keep back sound. The ring of fires still glowed in the distance, the animal chirping and barking still coming clearly. Everywhere except from the east. Dalhart was banking on that. They were leaving the way open to water, waiting over there.

He paused a moment and then crawled off to one side before resuming course, the others following. Merritt whispered, "God!" and swallowed loud enough to be heard. Roy's sprawled body was pin cushioned with arrows and his head had been almost severed.

They were still two hundred yards from the trees when the coyotes set up their shrill yapping in the night. Dalhart turned. "There's a wash just to the right. Dive over the bank. We've got to run for it."

He rose to his feet and an arrow whistled past his face with a louder sound than Big Kate's bullet had made. A smooth-bore muzzle loader boomed out from close by and Dalhart shot at the flash. They were running down the sandy bottom of the shallow arroyo now. A dark form outlined itself for a moment, and the .44 Dalhart carried in his right hand lashed fire again. The yap of the coyotes had changed to shrill screams from a dozen points surrounding them.

Merritt's cry came from a few feet to the rear, a panting cry of agony. "I'm hit. Got an arrow in my back!"

There was no time to look back, time for nothing but to run. The trees loomed up and then they were among them; Big Kate, Payson, Merritt, and the sheriff,

who had come a long way to bring back a wanted man. Dark forms closed in on him and he swung the barrel of the rifle. He flung himself among the trees and then leaped up among the rocks, the din of it in his ears, driving deep down into his consciousness that this was the end of it all. Something dark with an animal smell about it leaped at him and he split its head open with a blow from the barrel of the rifle. He'd long since dropped his six-shooter. He drove up among the rocks, higher and higher, and then the ground gave way beneath a leg and he found it deep in the earth to the hip.

It must have been a wolf den; one of the old loafers he'd heard nights, for they mostly stuck up among the rocks. For some strange reason, he remembered that you could tell an old loafer's track by the way his paws were more worn than the regular lobos.

He slid feet first into the hole, down, down and around a turn twenty feet in the bowels of the earth. He wasn't sure, but he thought he heard a woman scream. . . .

He remembered the rocks they rolled down the hole the next day and then crouched beside it to listen. He remembered sleeping fitfully the following night and then drinking the last trickle from his canteen. That must have been the second night. It was hard to be certain about such things. He lay there with his head in the mouth of the loafer's den and stared out of deep, sunken eyes across the wide expanse of the swale. It was nearly sundown now, and when he heard the trill of the mountain quail he crawled out and went down to the waterhole below and buried his bearded face in its cool depths. Later he climbed the ridge again.

There was no use in going down. He had no spade, and you could never tell when some of them might return. He couldnt tell from the distance which one was Payson or Merritt. They had been stripped and the white rings on the ground below their swinging heads showed that the fires long since had gone out. He was glad that the underbrush hid all but Big Kate's booted feet.

He swung the dripping canteen over one shoulder and set his face northward, on the first leg of the long journey home to tell the bank they could pay off the reward that had been offered for Joe.

PROBABLY the West's biggest man met the world's biggest dude when Sir George Gore, an Irishman, meandered into Wyoming, with Jim Bridger acting as his guide. Sir George brought along a fantastic company—a full wagon train, more than a hundred pack and draft animals plus dogs, a crew of henchmen and retainers—and enough fine liquor to float the works.

Jim Bridger and the nobleman became fast friends, and the latter left a lasting cultural note where the coyote howled by reading selections from Shakespeare out loud to the illiterate but wise frontiersman. Bridger liked this so much that he later hired a boy at $40 a month to read Shakespeare to him, until he had memorized entire plays and could recite them thunderously to his own enjoyment in the wilderness.

—*Stanley Jackson*

HELL CROWDS MY GUNS

CHAPTER ONE

This Is My Enemy

HE SAID, "Hello, Will," and that was all. After five years. He said it curtly, stepped into the saddle and swung his horse into the street. Unhurried. He didn't say, "Billy," in the old kid way. He rode the length of the block in slack indifference. He wore a

By GIFF CHESHIRE

new gun. Will noted it again, as Holly Brewster cut around a corner, and felt something like an electric current leap through his brain.

"Well, he's back," a voice said. "The pen didn't wear that ugliness off."

Will Landers broke his stare. He turned, scowling, as he always had when someone mentioned Holly's disfigurement. "What could?"

It takes a man longer to learn to die than to learn to kill—but he don't have to die but once!

"Didn't intend it that way." Cash Colby had come up quietly. "Meant that meanness. The thing he's made of. Don't give a damn if you did grow up together. Manhood changes them things."

"He was the best friend I ever had."

"Don't give a damn. Someday somebody will have to kill him."

"Then I'll have to."

"You're plain loony."

"I turned him into that."

"A kid accident."

"It raised hell."

Cash swallowed his reply. He was lean, rawboned, worn to thick hide and tough sinew by a lifetime on the cattle ranges of Tonto Basin. A man of the same cut, destined to the same future, Will planned to marry his daughter. He kept rubbing his chin while Cash climbed up. The buckboard stood in a street bottomless with spring mud. Will swung into the seat beside Cash. The horses patiently plucked their feet from the ooze. Wind drove the puddled water into the look of skimmed brown cream. The wheels sawed into the mire. . . .

Lorinda had supper ready. Will lingered to eat before saddling his horse and riding home with the gunnysack of provisions he had brought out in Cash's buckboard. It was Cash who told her of Holly Brewster's return, his face sharp with distaste. Lorinda listened without much interest, it seemed to Will. Her attention was on the supplies Cash had brought home. She was clearing them off the kitchen table with the subdued excitement women show when the larder has been restocked. She had agreed with Cash about Holly for many years. He had been a pretty good kid, but he had gone bad.

Her comment was, "Why did he have to come back? I wish he'd stayed away. He'll only get into trouble again. He hates too many people. Now too many hate him. The last few years it seemed he tried to turn the country against him."

That riled Will, though he tried not to show it. "Which came first?"

Lorinda shrugged. She was dark, small, with plain individuality that was surpassingly attractive. "I suppose you'll offer him everything you've got to help him get started again."

"If he wants it."

"Well, it's your business."

He knew she had nearly said more. That it was also her business now. They had careful plans. At best it would be another year before they could marry. He knew how this wait weighed on her, too. She was always making things, not showing them to him until they were finished and ready. Always thinking, always doing, bring it more close and real.

"No," Will said. "But it's my responsibility."

"Someday, Will, you've got to forget that. I was there, remember. I saw it happen. One of those things a kid will do before he thinks."

"Lye," Will said. "I threw it in his face. A bucket full."

"You didn't know what it was."

"Till I let go and it was too late."

"You were both ten. And it was a freak accident."

"I was old enough to know better."

"I'd call it young enough to become saddled with an obsession. Has there been a thing you could do for Holly since that you haven't tried to do?"

"I owed it to him."

"Why? He never blamed you. He just took to hating everybody else. To running wild when he grew up. Finally he got into that fight and went up for mutilating a man deliberately. Beating a face to pieces with the barrel of his gun."

"That man was once the kid that put the name Pruneface on Holly."

"You nearly went broke providing a lawyer."

Or we'd have been married three years

ago . . . But she didn't say that. She began to put supper on the table. Cash had listened with the same bald disapproval. Everyone had called Will Landers a fool. Nobody seemed to realize that the withering, destroying caustic had splashed also upon the soul of Holly's friend.

The pelting rain, the churned mud in his ranch yard, blanketed the approach of the horse. Will caught the fall of a shadow on the kitchen window and looked out. The rider had passed out of sight. Fixing his noon meal, Will turned from the stove and stepped to the door. He drew straight as he pulled it open.

Holly Brewster swung down at the edge of the porch, the folds of his slicker cascading caught water. He grinned and said, "Howdy, Billy," and it was in the old tone of voice. He trailed reins, stepped onto the porch, and had a wet hand held out.

Will took it, taut tendons still holding his shoulders back. "Come in, Holly. You're in time to eat."

"Your cooking? Hope it's improved."

Holly Brewster left his slicker and drenched hat on the porch. He wore an easy grin when he came inside. The new gun was still on his hip. Will closed the door, looking at him. The fine, curly black hair, the flat, delicate ears, the wide shoulders and lean hips. His father had mustanged until he got himself killed trying to break an *oreana* that had him beat. But he'd made a handsome figure. Holly might have been him, but his identity had been scoured away.

Holly stood still under the study. Some reflex had caused him to close his eyes in time. His sight hadn't been hurt.

"Wondered," Holly said, "if you could use a man."

"Why sure." *Good God, I can't. When I've been saving every dime I can squeeze out.* "Calf roundup coming. But I can't pay much."

Holly motioned with a hand. "It don't matter. We're old friends, Billy. We always helped each other out."

Will put the meal on the table—bacon, beans and skillet bread. He poured coffee, and his jaw was clenched tighter than it had been. They sat down.

Holly broke off a piece of the hot, flat bread. "Heard a bad one in town this morning. Somebody shot Merle Lang on his own range. Emptied a gun. Never put a slug higher'n Merle's breast bone."

It was a moment before Will could speak. "Holly, Merle was one of the worst to devil you when we were kids in school."

"I don't hold that against him, now he's dead. Never forgot, though, the time Merle hoorawed me for being sweet on Lorinda Colby. It turned into quite a scrap. It happened I *was* sweet on her. Heard you ain't married her yet, Billy."

Will didn't like the breath of cold play-

ing now up and down his back. "No."

"Used to think I'd rather see her dead than married to anybody but me. But a man grows up. Gets lots of time to think in the pen."

"You've forgiven them, Holly?"

"Why not? They used to call themselves the Wild Bunch, at school and everywhere. Merle Lang and Pitt Thrash and Davie Yule."

"There was a fourth one, Holly."

"Sure." Holly helped himself to more beans. "Tim Mawson. The one who's face I beat off and got put in the pen for. You know how that happened. He got sore at me in a card game. Called me Pruneface. I lost my head. Others're good solid citizens now, I hear. Married men. I don't hate nobody anymore, Billy."

"Never could understand why you didn't me."

Holly grinned. "It wasn't your fault. Hell, it happened out there in the yard, before you lost your folks. Lorinda was over here, remember? We were a couple of tadpoles showing off in front of a girl. She was sure pretty, even then. I socked you with a rotten apple. How was you to know what was in that bucket you swung off the wash bench? You figured it was well water. Anybody would have. Your maw hadn't said anything about fixing to make soap. I always understood how it was. She blamed herself, too, and she shouldn't have."

"It raised hell."

"Man gets over things like that, Billy. Was a time I figured I couldn't stand to live in this country again. But I came back. I'll help you through the summer work, then maybe I'll turn mustanger like my dad."

Will had managed to force down a little food. He drank his coffee and called it a meal. . . .

"Time's come for me to get a axe handle," Cash Colby said that evening, "and go to work on your head." He sat across the fireplace from Will, his stocking feet on a bearskin rug, his cheeks caving as he puffed his pipe. "I seen him give you a glassy stare in town. Then all at once he's pawing all over you. And you put him to work. To live out at your place with you."

"Why not? The man's got to get a start."

Cash slid his feet over the rug, sat up straight. "Merle Lang died hard. Left a wife and baby."

That electric dancing drifted across Will's scalp again. "What's that got to do with it?"

Lorinda looked up from her sewing. It was curtains now, yellow ones. She never left off. "You haven't forgotten the Wild Bunch, Will. There's no question they made life hard for Holly when he was a kid. Youngsters can be so awfully cruel. Five years ago he disfigured Tim Mawson for life. Now he's out of prison and Merle Lang is dead."

"Prison can put some awful things in a man's head," Cash said. "Don't know if I could stand five years shut away like that. Not with the things Holly had to brood about. I'm a old man and I've learned a little. We figure we run ourselves but we don't. Things can push up from inside our brains. Things a man figures he's forgotten. And take hold. I know."

"What's your point, Cash?"

"They's three members of that old Wild Bunch left. None of them prizes, but all growed into decent enough men. Every one with a family. And Holly ain't forgot or forgiven a thing."

And Lorinda. He said, I used to think I'd rather see her dead than married to anybody else. Will rose impatiently.

"Holly's had a hard time of it. He deserves a chance. He wants to turn mustanger and needs a stake. I'll let him earn one."

CHAPTER TWO

The Guns Wait

HOLLY was a good cowhand, though there was little to do at this season. They outrode Will's little patch of range the next day, a slack, wet job he could have done by himself. They came in at noon to find a saddle-horse standing at the hitch bar in the ranch yard, hunched against the driving rain.

The sheriff was in the kitchen, drinking coffee he had made for himself. He greeted Will with friendly casualness, flung a look of mild interest at Holly. He had run Holly up five years before.

"Pitt Thrash was shot last night. A sixgun was emptied in his belly. Somebody called him outside, done it, and was gone before Pitt's missus could collect her wits."

Will had put his back against the door jamb. He was glad of that, for he knew he would have swayed visibly. Holly was frowning, looking shocked.

"Any tracks?" Holly asked.

"Whoever done it used the mud on the road and Pitt's lane. Nothing leaves tracks in that stuff." The officer was a bent, gray man. He flung a flat, hard stare at Holly. "Pitt ain't been having trouble with nobody. Neither had Merle Lang. They were tough, ornery kids, but they come out of it. No enemies. Not the last few years, anyhow."

"Out of touch with things," Holly said. "I wouldn't know about the last few years."

"Where were you last night, Holly?"

"Here. Playing poker with Billy for beans."

The sheriff glanced at Will. "That right?"

You did it . . . you did it to him. . . . Somehow Will Landers kept his face immobile. "That's right. Holly showed up around noon yesterday. I put him to work."

"Then that settles that," the sheriff said. He finished his coffee, got into his rain clothes and rode out.

Holly got himself coffee and carried it to the table. He was frowning a little, but easy.

"Why did you tell him that?" Will's voice was barely above a whisper.

"Because you were always willing to help me. The only one who ever was."

"What's wrong with the truth?"

"Would he have believed it? You heard what he said. Nobody hated Merle and Pitt lately. I used to. Everybody knew it. And I'm back. Home from the pen. They up and get gut-shot. Billy, if I hadn't of said that, he'd of taken me in. Sure as hell, I'd been right back where I just come from, only waiting to hang, this time. You don't know what that's like, Billy. You got no idea."

Will's voice was a flat beat. "I didn't get home from Colby's till around eleven last night. It's about the same distance the other way to Pitt's. And I spent a couple of hours jowering with Cash and Lorinda."

"Sure," Holly said. "I could of got over to Pitt's and back while you were gone. That's why I had to make you alibi me. And thanks, Billy. There never was a thing you wouldn't do for me."

"If the sheriff happens to check with the Colbys, they'll make me out a liar, and we'll both be in trouble."

"He won't," Holly said. "Rode back toward Pitt's to start over. He was satisfied. He'll go back to town the other way. I had the notion he looked relieved. He was always decent. Treated me white even when he had to run me up."

"Sooner or later it'll come out."

"If they don't catch the right man first. If you don't like it, Billy, you got my permission to overtake the sheriff and tell him you lied. He's got to stick it on

somebody. That'd save him working."

They stayed in that afternoon, for the thundering rain kept up. Holly took a frayed deck of cards and lost himself in solitaire when Will impatiently rejected poker. Since his folks had passed on, Will had rarely used more of the big ranch house than the kitchen, though he had been getting the rest in shape for Lorinda. That was all done with the patient, painstaking care of a man in love and long denied.

He lighted a fire in the old parlor fireplace, as he did frequently to keep the rooms from growing musty. Now it was only to get away from Holly.

The man had been in bed when Will returned from Colby's. There had been no reason to look at his horse to see if it were wet or muddy. Holly had gone down to chore while Will got breakfast the following morning. He would have had time to curry the horse, if he hadn't done so the night before. Will had noticed nothing when they mounted to ride out that morning.

You're crazy, he thought. *You've let Cash and Lorinda work on you. Good Lord, see it Holly's way. There's enough circumstantial evidence to hang him. Ain't he had enough?* Yet it didn't ease him, and he knew why this was so. There were two men left of the old Wild Bunch: Davie Yule and Tim Mawson. The first as yet unpunished. The other bearing a scarred face, but instrumental in sending Holly up, and, *"I used to think I'd rather see Lorinda dead than married to anybody else. . . ."*

There had to be a rational answer to what had happened to Lang and Thrash. Their spread adjoined. Men didn't tell everything they knew. Both had settled down but were still rough, blunt men. Their wives and neighbors might not have known of any current enemies. That didn't prove none had existed.

A discernment came, a thing he hadn't realized. Certainly it had been Cash Colby who first began to build this pattern of circumstantial evidence. It was so stormy there wouldn't be much coming and going among range folks today. But before long, Cash would hear what had happened to Pitt Thrash. He would perceive instantly that Holly had had the opportunity. He would get word to the sheriff and blast that alibi. Will Landers or no. Cash was built that way. And Lorinda would back her father.

No matter what, you made that man in the kitchen. . . .

The next day provided an excitement that buried all other considerations. In the bare foothills, along the slopes, pooling water began to overflow. It probed along the lines of gravity, seeking motion, combination. It gathered into larger and yet larger streams, down ravines, along coulees, recombining and moving faster. There was danger of a flash flood. Will rode against it all day with Holly, getting his scattered bunches herded onto high land. He knew the same intensity of action went on everywhere throughout the range. Livelihood was at stake and more important than transient sensation.

Holly Brewster gave himself unstintingly, crowding his horse into dangerous water, prowling treacherous canyons, without hesitation and solely because he had hired out to do it. It was not friendship. It was the integrity of a range-bred man, and any other would have done the same. When late that night they sat down to supper, Will remembered this and made up his mind.

"Holly, you've got to clear out. Cash Colby is suspicious of you. Sooner or later he'll cause you trouble."

"Cash never did like me. Never wanted me to be around Lorinda."

"He'll hear about Thrash, do his thinking and bust that alibi. I've got some spare money on hand. A stake. You better saddle up and ride."

"That'd admit I done it, wouldn't it?"

"You're a cooked goose once Cash tells the sheriff I lied to cover you. Better to take the blame and get away than hang."

"I paid for what I done to Tim Mawson. Plenty. You don't know how much. If I went on the dodge, I'd be on the dodge the rest of my life. You don't want me to do that, Billy."

"I don't want to see you swing."

"Maybe they'll get the right man soon enough. There's always that chance." Bringing out tobacco and papers, Holly made a cigarete. His hands were steady. His mottled, wrinkled face showed lines of deep fatigue. The eyes, puckered into a soulless squint, watched the fingers' operations in idle interest.

"Holly. you'd better beat it."

"You trying to tell me, Billy, that you don't want any part of it?"

Will shrugged. "No. No, Holly, it's up to you."

Holly licked the cigarette, wiped a match under the table, and began to smoke. "You aim to get married pretty soon, Billy?"

"Not right off. Things have been slow the past two-three years."

"You must of spent a lot of money on my trial, Billy. Reckon that went hard on you and Lorinda. Been meaning to tell you I figure to pay it back by mustanging. Learned that game in and out from my dad. Take time, but you can count on it. Only, I need a little stake to go mustanging."

"I'll stake you anytime."

"Aim to earn it. I'm a able-bodied man. Not pretty, maybe, but able-bodied." Holly pushed back from the table. "It'd sure help, though, if Cash wouldn't go blabbing to the sheriff."

God, why did I tell him that? What if he decides to shut Cash up? And Lorinda! And why am I so damned suspicious? He hasn't said or done a thing that isn't perfectly all right.

DAVIE YULE rode in the next day on a mud-splattered horse. Davie was one of the two remaining members of the old Wild Bunch. He was grim-eyed, a man Will had always detested. He wore his gun on the outside of his slicker and had timed his arrival to catch Will and Holly in for noon. He was coming across the porch by the time Will opened the door.

He said, "Step aside, Will. I aim to talk to Brewster. And watch him while I'm talking."

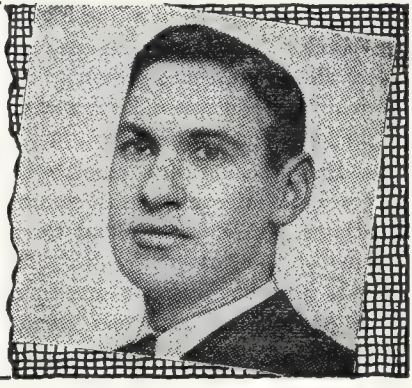
Holly, who had been starting a fire, had looked up without much interest. He nodded. "Talk away, Davie. 'Less you're scared I'll jab you with a piece of kindling."

Yule halted half way across the porch. He was big, coarse-featured, and the lines of his mouth were hard. "I don't aim to

REPORTER REPORTS ON SWITCH TO CALVERT

WASHINGTON, D. C.—Arnold Fine, Washington reporter and night club editor, flashes this news about today's whiskies. "Switch to Calvert," he says. "I have. Calvert honestly *is* lighter, smoother, milder."

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N.Y.C.



be gut-shot, Brewster. If you're gunning for me, I am to have a fair shake. Here and now."

Holly touched a match to the kindling, put the lids back on the stove. "Why should I be gunning for you, Davie?"

"Why'd you kill Pitt and Merle?"

"Who said I did? Sheriff was over about that. Went away satisfied."

"I ain't."

"Why not?"

"We deviled you a lot. Too hard, I reckon. Always had a hang-dog feelin' about that. But we knew you wanted to kill us even then. It sort of goaded us on."

Holly spread his hands, grinning. "Since then we all growed up, didn't we?"

"I seen you tie into Tim Mawson that time. While it lasted you were a crazy man, determined to beat the face off him, or die trying."

"It happened he called me Pruneface. He was the kid that started that."

"If you've still got a grudge, Brewster, I want it settled in the open. Now. I've got a wife and three kids."

"Everybody married," Holly said. "Everybody settled down with his woman. Raising a family. What makes you think I ain't just another man, Davie, wanting to do things like that myself?"

"You want to make it a fair fight?"

"Why? You were just one of the Wild Bunch. Only thing I recollect about you personally, Davie, was the time you drew an ugly picture of me and pinned it to my back. Took a hour for me to catch on why all the kids was giggling. At recess I whipped you for it. Then the teacher licked me for starting a fight. We had our fracas a long time ago, Davie. Don't let it work on you so. Just go on home."

Davie Yule seemed about to crowd it. Some of the kid cruelty had come back in his face, but under it was fear. Holly still had on his gun, still stood by the stove, in which the fire was beginning to crackle, easy and bland and motionless. Yule turned, making a show of it when he put his back to Holly. He had never distrusted, never feared Will Landers and relied on him now. He stepped onto his horse, whirled it and rode out.

After supper that evening, Will rose from the table saying. "My night to go courting, Holly. Think you can hold things down by yourself?"

"Sure, Billy. You run along."

Will saddled a horse and rode out. Half a mile from the house he swung abruptly to his left. The black night was shredded by the steady rain. He dropped partly into a flooded gully and turned back, emerging at a selected point behind his place where he could see and not be seen. He waited, astride his horse, hearing the beat of rain on his hat and slicker and the drenched earth about him. He could see the lighted kitchen window. He had left Holly playing solitaire at the table by the window. Holly was still at it.

Will waited for a long while, growing cold in the wet wind. If Holly used this opportunity, he wouldn't dare wait too long. It was farther to either Davie Yule's or Tim Mawson's than it had been to Thrash's. Yet Holly seemed intent on his monotonous card game. *Maybe he's smart enough to see I might try to trap him.*

Holly rose from the table suddenly. Will saw him move past the window twice, beyond the lamp and hazed by its glow. Will's throat ached; his shoulders and back were set rigidly. Abruptly the lamp went out. Will tried to think what to do, whether to trail Holly until sure, then jump him, or simply ride back and prevent his leaving.

A dim, flickering light showed suddenly in an upstairs window. It sprang into fullness as the match lighted a lamp there. It was the bedroom Holly had been using. Will's knees began to tremble until he had to take his weight off the stirrups. He

nearly grabbed leather when he saw Holly pull off his shirt. Then Holly was lost to view until he stood before the lamp in his underwear and blew it out.

A deep relief came to Will, and he knew what he was going to do next. He swung the horse, repicked his way to the trail, and set out for the long ride to Colby's.

It actually had been his night to call on Lorinda, and they had been expecting him. Laying for him almost, Will thought as soon as he had entered the warm, bright house.

Cash gave him a long scowling stare. "Another murder. Another one of the old Wild Bunch gone."

"The sheriff was over. He went away satisfied."

"I heard about it. You lied to him. Figured I'd ought to hear why before I ride in to see the sheriff."

"I had to, Cash."

"It was Holly told the lie. Not you. You only backed him up."

"Holly knew he was as good as hung without an alibi. On nothing but circumstantial evidence. It's like he says. If they take him in, the case is closed. Otherwise they'll have to keep working and maybe find out who it was that really done it."

"Holly Brewster done it. You were a damned fool to lie for him. Remember the cold stare he gave you in town? Then all at once he was out asking for a job. He's using that old anything-to-make-it-up-to-Holly feeling of yours. It's just what he needs to cover himself in what he come back home to this country to do."

"I backed his lie because Holly didn't know I could cover him in a different way, Cash. It just happened I took a look at his horse when I got home from here that night. It hadn't been out of the barn. And I ain't been keeping up a saddle band." Will was surprised at the ease with which he stated that. He had practiced it all the way over. He had to spike Cash's guns.

Cash was frowning, a little taken back. Will glanced at Lorinda and saw that relief had sprung onto her face. Cash shoved a hand into his pocket and hauled out his pipe.

"Never knowed you to lie, Will," Cash said, "till I heard what you'd told the sheriff. How do I know this ain't another one?"

"You don't," Will said, and met his eyes. "But if you'll cool off, there's one thing you'll remember. Any man's got a right to a fair shake."

"How do you know he ain't riding on his next victim right now? Aiming to make you lie for him again? Figuring you'll find a way to cover him and keep me shut up?"

"I know he isn't."

Lorinda put down her embroidery. "I believe Will, Dad. You let your hackles down. Even if it's true, Holly won't find it easy from here on. We heard Davie Yule's got his wife's brothers acting as bodyguards. And all at once Tim Mawson's hired a couple of punchers. There'll be no more surprise gunnings. If Holly's innocent, it's only justice that those two've had a scare thrown into them. Lord knows they asked for it all through the years of Holly's boyhood. They were mean, ornery kids and they wouldn't lay off him."

"That man's off his top."

"Whether of not, you let the sheriff unscramble the case. You think twice and then again before you poke a finger in it."

Will rode home, certain that Cash would watch and wait. Nonetheless, Will took a look at Holly's horse, this night. It hadn't been out of the barn. Holly's boots were by the kitchen stove. As he mounted the stairs, Will could hear the man snoring. He went to bed.

CHAPTER THREE

Peace by Bullet

AT BREAKFAST Holly said, "Cash Colby snorting fire?"

"He'll hold in a while."

"Thanks, Billy. Hoped you could handle him. Cash don't know what trouble is."

"He ain't had it so easy."

Holly waved an impatient hand. "What most men call hell ain't even its outposts. Hell's in a man's mind, Billy. When life don't look good to you. When you'd rather die than live, but have to live—and do the things you've got to to keep living."

"A man can control his mind, Holly."

"That's what you think, and Cash and all the rest."

"Thought you didn't hate anybody anymore, Holly."

"Don't. But I've learned some things, Billy. I was just telling you."

Will took up his coffee cup, glancing across it casually. "Holly, why'd you give me that cut in town?"

"Didn't know how you were going to take me. Man just out of the pen wonders about things like that. You just kind of stared at me. Figured you'd turned on me, too."

"You didn't give me a chance," Will said.

"I know. I got to thinking it over. And I come out to see you, didn't I?"

The rain was abating at last. They outrode that day, finding a couple of drowned steers, but everything else was all right. They were on the east boundary, riding in, when it happened. The horses poked along the floor of the high desert, a rim rising hard to the left. Will's ears registered the rifle crack as his mount stumbled. He managed to swing himself clear when the animal went down. He hit the mud on the blind side, hearing Holly swear. The downed horse kicked, tried to rise, slumped flat. Blood was pumping from its neck. The rifle fired again and again.

Will saw Holly's empty saddle as the man's horse swung past him, pulling on its reins. Holly was flattened in the mud. He had his revolver up, but it was too far to the top of the rim. Will pulled his own gun, but it was covered with mud. As fast as a man could jack, the rifle up there kept shooting. The shots came wickedly close. Will counted them patiently, knew when the weapon was empty. It grew quiet then.

Holly crawled to Will, and his voice was urgent. "Billy you all right?"

"All right," Will said.

Holly's wrinkled, purple face held a twisted grin. "Now who do you think the killer is? Looks like you're next on the list."

"Was it me or you he was after?"

"What do you mean?"

"You threw one hell of a scare into a couple of people who think they're apt to get it like this."

"You mean Yule and Mawson?"

"Yule couldn't crowd you into a gunfight. He was always pretty good. He put stock in that. Heard he's got a couple bodyguards, but that don't help a man's nerves much. I've got an idea he's figured out a better way to handle it."

"If he'd of hurt you, Billy, I'd—"

"I'm all right."

They waited another ten minutes, but there was no more firing from the rim. They didn't hear a horse pound off, which made it a ticklish business when they moved at last. Will shot his stricken horse and swung up behind Holly. It would take long, hard traveling to get onto the bench from here. It would have served scant purpose. The ambusher, when he departed, would have left a fouled, misleading trail. They rode on in.

At supper Holly said, "Billy, what if

one of the old Wild Bunch turned on the rest and used the fact that I've come back to take out his spite?"

"Who'd it be? Yule or Mawson?"

"It could even be both."

"Then why're they afraid of you? Davie Yule was really scared."

"They got reason to be, Billy. Ain't they? Must of told 'em a dozen times I'd get' em someday, when I was a kid."

"The man was whamming at you, Holly. Not me. What you say don't fit with that."

"It nearly got you. I'd like to blow out their guts."

"Cut it, Holly." Will stared at him for a long while. "Tomorrow we'll see if we can find out who was on the rim."

Holly played his patient solitaire for an hour after supper. Will was whittling, ostensibly lost in it, but watching the man. He had never noticed before how Holly's lips moved in silent talk to himself. He had never noticed the fierceness that came and went in Holly's eyes. The man was brooding. Deeply. It lifted a restless unpleasantness in Will.

At last, he said, "Holly, what're you thinking about?"

"Cash Colby. He worries me. Wish you'd ride over there and tell him about that busher. Let him know there's more than one answer to this thing."

"I will," Will said. "Next time I'm over there."

"Wish you'd do it tonight."

"What's the rush?"

"Cash worried me. Never had any use for me after I growed up. Cussed me out a couple of times when I showed up to say howdy to Lorinda. Maybe she asked him to run me off. She was different after—well, no pretty girl's going to make over a pruneface."

"Holly," Will said, "you ran wild for a long time. Drinking. Getting into scrapes. You started picking fights and making trouble yourself. From the time you sprouted whiskers, till you went up, people took to calling you plain mean. Don't you blame Cash. And certainly not Lorinda."

Holly stared at him. "You know what it's like to feel dead, Billy? Yet alive, knowing you got to keep on living? Billy, you get a hankering for excitement you can't ride. Reckon I know. With everybody despising you."

"I never did."

"No, Billy. You never did."

"You said you'd forgiven everybody. But you've been brooding all evening. That shot off the rim bring it back?"

"Riled me a little, maybe." Holly scattered the deck of cards in an impatient motion. "This here's the country where I was born and raised, yet I can't show myself in it without everybody locking his door and oiling his gun. You were right. That was Davie Yule threw

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them shots at me. Aims to get me first. Ain't I took enough off of him already?"

"Watch yourself, Holly. Don't get to feeling that way again."

Holly's face twisted. His eyes were cold and bleak. "What do you know about it, Billy? Can a man help what crawls out of his brain? Can a man help what he's got to do to keep living?"

Will stood up. He was cold all over. He was bewildered and deeply disturbed. "He can hold a sensible view on what he's got to do, Holly."

"Yeah. He can try. You going over to Colby's? You going to tell Cash somebody else's doing a little sneak-shooting around here? Davie Yule."

"All right, Holly," Will said. "I'll go over to Colby's. It was Yule, all right. We'll try to prove it."

Will saddled and rode out toward Colby's, a feeling of horror now high in him. Cash had said the thing Holly had, just now. *We figure we run ourselves, but we don't. Things can push up from inside our brains—things a man figures he's forgotten—and take hold.* . . . The rain had stopped. There was a little moon, and he could see the trail.

AGAIN Will swung left and made the circuit back to the viewpoint that let him watch his house. The lamp in the window still blinded him, yet he caught glimpses of Holly, pacing back and forth. Will had thought about turning out Holly's horse, but decided against it. The thing had to be settled now.

It seemed that an hour passed before the kitchen light went out. Will waited, yearning to see another match spring alight in the upstairs window. It didn't. He could make out no movement in the obstructed ranch yard. Will had his horse against the concealing background of a willow thicket. He was shaking. He was sick with anxiety.

He stiffened when he saw the horse move out of the yard. At a walk. Its direction told Will his guess had been shrewd. It was not toward Mawson's or Yule's. It was the trail Will had ridden a short distance. Toward Colby's. Yet he rode openly as yet. This alone kept the merest uncertainty in Will.

He knew better than to follow too closely. He was raw with fear that the man would slip away from him, get ahead. He rode carefully, at a distance to the right, knowing every foot of the way from long experience. Once across the bottom, with its two high-banked creeks, Holly left the trail, pulling off the other way. Will crossed over, now dogging directly behind.

Will wasn't certain where he lost Holly. His careful stalking caused him to seek concealment, riding a shuttling course. There came a time when he couldn't pick him up again. He hurried his horse, growing reckless. There was no discernible movement ahead. Perhaps Holly had grown suspicious of pursuit. They were over half way to Colby's, on open, rock-roughened plateau. Holly might be waiting, might have hurried ahead; or simply have lost himself in the broken terrain to come in at an unexpected angle.

Will stood his horse a moment, torn by the urge to bolt ahead and warn Cash Colby. Yet for Will Landers himself to do so would be consigning Holly to his doom. Because the cards were stacked against him, had always been. *It was you—you who started it. In a moment of horseplay.* He'd had it to buck ever since. He swung back to the trail, lifted his horse to a trot, and rode on.

Holly spoke out of the night, catching Will on the far side of an outcrop of rock.

"Had a notion you might be laying for me, Billy. So it's got to that now. The question of you or me."

"You saw me."

"Yeah. Quite a ways back." Holly had dismounted and stood ahead of his horse. He had his legs spread, both thumbs hooked in his belt. "So now you can be sure, Billy. Half a dozen times I've seen you trying to make up your mind. I done my best to keep you from it. You can't stop me, Billy."

Will kept his hand away from his gun, kept saddle. "Which one was it this time? Cash or Lorinda? Or both?"

"Cash. I need more time, Billy. He worries me. Mawson and Yule turned into hard nuts to crack. Knew you wouldn't let me ride if you were home. Aimed to get Cash through the window, even if you were there. And make you lie for me again. Till I'm through."

"Otherwise you didn't have him down for it?"

"No. Just the old Wild Bunch, Billy. Four tough, mean kids who made my life hell. I can't help it. Something in me's running this. It comes over me, and I've got to do it."

Will shifted uneasily. The movement disclosed clearly that Holly was watching for trouble, ready to meet it. He was determined to go ahead, even if he had to kill his best friend. "Holly, why couldn't you forget it, like you claimed you had?"

"A man just can't. His life runs on a track, Billy. He can't shift from one to another just because he's a mind to."

"You made a rotten use of my friendship."

"Couldn't help it. I needed cover. Was trying to figure it out the day I run onto you in town. Right after it happened, you said you'd do anything to make it up, Billy. Anything. I remembered that. I used it."

"What did you intend to do afterward?"

"Fade out again. And maybe have peace in my head."

Will thought for a long moment. The merest updraft came across the plateau. Holly stood motionless, somewhat shadowed by the rocks. In the darkness, his figure blended into that of his horse. He was as nearly motionless as a living man could be.

Will let out a long breath, and then he too grew motionless. Then he said, "Holly, I'm going to dismount."

"Go ahead, Billy."

Will swung down. "I'm coming toward you, Holly. To take you to town."

"It's your say, Billy. Come and get me. If you can't, I deal the cards."

Will's brain was frozen. High horror had him, but he knew he had this thing to do. His gun grips were free; his swinging arms brushing them. But it was Holly who first made a stab with his hand. He had always been faster than Will. It had been a vanity that eased him before he went away. Now Will moved with all the swift precision at his command, not for his own life but for the sake of others. *The sheriff would have taken him if you hadn't lied, and now it's too late.* He fired.

The single explosion held him paralyzed while he watched Holly take a stumbling step forward. He still couldn't move when Holly crashed. Then it broke away and he ran forward. He had lifted his gun only as far as the man's chest. The bullet had torn through the center. He took the gun from Holly's loosened fingers.

Will hunkered there a long while. Holly hadn't fired. They had cornered each other in utter desperation. In the last second, Holly had rejected his apparent choices, facing the law again or killing his one friend. He had perceived a third, and taken it. For fifteen years, Holly Brewster had wanted one thing; peace of mind.

I threw the lye that started it. I threw the slug that stopped it.

Will rose and walked toward his horse.

Hunter reached for Gaza's throat. . . .

TROUBLE RIDER

By A. KENNETH BRENT

"We'll take the gun way home,* amigo—*where you ride by day, kill by night an' sleep only once . . . six feet under!"

HE WAITED restlessly while the train maneuvered to a slow stop beside the station platform. When the passengers began to leave the coaches, he moved forward and saw the woman at once. She was tall, blonde and coolly graceful in her wide-brimmed hat and unwrinkled blue silk dress that she must have changed to only a few miles back.

He removed his hat and walked over to her. He said, "Miss Scott?"

Her eyes touched him and moved briefly to search the rest of the station before returning to his face. "Yes," she said. "I'm Stella Scott."

"Will Hunter," he introduced himself.

"Mr. Embree sent me. I'll drive you to the ranch."

Her brown eyes shadowed momentarily. She said, "Oh, Clay didn't come?"

"Mr. Embree was held up at the last minute," Hunter said carefully. "Urgent business that needed his attention."

The porter set two leather grips beside Stella Scott, and Hunter picked them up. He said, "I'll take you to the hotel. It's just a block down the street."

"Do you mean we're not going to the ranch this evening?" Her voice expressed puzzlement.

A smile touched Hunter's lips. "It's fifty miles from here," he told her. "We'll leave early in the morning and make it in a day and a half."

"I had no idea it was so far from town," she said. She added half to herself, "Clay didn't mention it."

They left the station and walked toward the main part of town, half a block away. Red Rock was a raw town, growing wild with its new railroad artery, and the main street stood bleak and hot in the slanting rays of the late afternoon sun. The uneven board sidewalks were crowded with cowboys in with cattle for shipment, laborers off the new railroad grade south, and ranchers buying supplies. There were two mercantiles, a barber shop, the hotel, and a dozen saloons along the main two block stretch. It was a man's town.

They turned in at the unpainted two story hotel. "I've already registered for you," Hunter said. "Your room is on the second floor."

He led her to it, up a flight of narrow stairs and down a close, shadowy hallway. At a corner room he opened the door and set the bags inside.

"I'll be back in an hour to take you to supper," he said, handing her a key.

He returned down the hall, but at the head of the stairs stopped and looked back. Stella Scott still stood in the doorway, watching him.

DOWNSTAIRS he went into the hotel taproom and took a spot at the empty end of the bar. "Whiskey," he said.

Fat Frank Globe poured out a glass and set the bottle beside it. "Red Embree's wife-to-be you just came in with?" he asked.

Hunter nodded.

The bartender wiped his sweaty face on a dirty bar towel. "Why didn't he come get her himself?"

Hunter sipped at the whiskey. He said, "He's buying cattle."

"Hell," Globe growled. "That's no reason. You could have checked 'em just as well, maybe better.

Will Hunter shrugged. "Embree likes to do it himself."

Globe moved away to wait on a customer then come back. "Why does that devil Embree want to keep a woman on his ranch? He ain't interested in anything but beef cattle and grazing land."

"I just work for him, Globe," Hunter said. "I don't ask him questions about his love life."

The bartender refilled Hunter's glass. "You don't have to," he said. "You know he wants her to play hostess to his cattle buyers and to show off at dances. The other ranchers in the Owlhorns have wives, so he's got to."

Hunter left the bar without downing his second drink. He sat down in the lobby and smoked at a cigar until an hour was gone, then climbed the stairs and went to Stella Scott's room.

When he knocked on the door, she said, "Mr. Hunter?"

"Yes?"

She opened the door and stepped into the lamp-lighted hall. She was wearing a white dress now and her pale blonde hair was up in two neat buns. In the shadowy light she looked very young, not over twenty-two or twenty-three.

They went to the hotel dining room and

sat down at an oilcloth covered table in a corner. They were the only ones in the room, and a Mexican waiter brought them two plates of fried beef with boiled potatoes and beans.

Stella Scott did not begin eating immediately. She looked at Hunter and smiled. "You don't talk very much," she said.

He put down his fork. "No," he said. "I was never much good at it."

She was silent for a moment, then asked, "If Clay's ranch is fifty miles from a town, who will perform the wedding?"

"Mile-away Jones has been waiting at the ranch for a week," Hunter said. "He's a circuit rider."

They ate the rest of their meal in silence and were preparing to leave when Conrad Shannon, an Owlhorn rancher, came into the room. Shannon's lean, handsome face was flushed, and he walked with the exaggerated deliberateness of a man very drunk. When he saw Hunter and the woman, his eyes brightened.

"Introduce me, Hunter," he said, trying to bow and stumbling against the table. "This must be the next Mrs. Embree."

Hunter stood up and laid a hand on the man's arm. "All right, Shannon," he said. "We'll manage the introductions some other time."

Shannon shook his hand off angrily. "We'll do it now," he said thickly. "Lady, I'm the man Red Embree is trying to steal a thousand acres of top pasture land from. Maybe if you would—"

Hunter helped Stella Scott from her chair and walked her quickly away, leaving Shannon still talking. The latter started to follow them, but stopped when Hunter turned and took a step back toward him. He stood, sullen and swaying perilously, as they left the room.

"I'm sorry about that," Hunter said. "When Shannon is drunk, he likes to tell his troubles."

Stella Scott stopped at the foot of the stairs. "What did he mean when he said I was the next Mrs. Embree?" she asked.

A faint light of annoyance flickered in Hunter's eyes. He said after a pause, "You don't know a whole lot about Clay Embree, do you?"

Two spots of crimson colored Stella Scott's cheeks. "I met him only one time," she said evenly. "In St. Louis when he was selling cattle. We've corresponded since then. Has he been married before?"

"Twice," Hunter said bluntly.

He heard the soft catch of her breath.

"Oh," she said. "I suppose I shouldn't ask you what happened."

Hunter's voice remained blunt. "One of them ran off with a coffee drummer. The other went back to her home in Chicago."

Stella began to ascend the stairs. "I didn't know," she said quietly. "Of course, it isn't important."

"No," said Hunter.

A sudden shadow fell across them, and Hunter looked up to see a man standing at the head of the stairs watching them. He was small and slim and his smooth, beardless face bespoke his youth. It was only in the flat paleness of his eyes that a history of experience beyond his years could be read.

Hunter stopped involuntarily on seeing him and continued only when he saw the small man's eyes flick sharply to Stella Scott.

He finished the climb, then said, "Hello, Billy. I didn't know you were back."

The youth did not shift his pale eyes from Stella Scott's face. He laughed and it was a vague sound without meaning.

"You didn't," he said. "There's some others that don't either."

Silence was awkward between them as the man stood, partially blocking their path. Finally Hunter guided Stella around him and they continued down the shadowy hall.

"Luck, Billy," he said behind him.

The laugh, still vague and without humor or meaning, echoed from the stairway landing.

"Who was that?" Stella Scott asked.

"Billy Gaza," Hunter said and added nothing at her questioning glance.

He left her at her room and returned to the bar downstairs. He walked to the end, where Frank Globe was washing glasses in a metal tub.

"How long has Gaza been in town, Frank?" he asked.

"Rode in this morning," the bartender told him.

Hunter said, "Does he know who the woman with me is?"

"Couldn't say."

"If he asks you any questions, put him off," Hunter said. "Tell him she's my wife maybe."

Globe wiped his hands carefully on a soggy towel. "You think he may try to make trouble? You think he's carrying a grudge because Red Embree had him sent up for rustling?"

"Billy's not very bright," Hunter said. "And he's got a nasty mean streak. It's a bad combination, and a year in jail won't have helped him."

Globe nodded thoughtfully. "He'd be afraid to tackle Embree with all his hands around him. He might try an easier way of getting even." The bartender changed the subject. "I wonder why a woman like she seems to be would want to come out here and marry a rawhide like Embree?"

Hunter moved away from the bar. "I didn't ask her," he said.

HE SAT down in the lobby again and watched the men who came and went by the front door. When the clock in the corner tolled nine, he climbed the stairs and went to his room, which was across from Stella Scott's. He was fitting the key in the lock when her door opened and she stepped into the hall.

"Will," she said.

He stood with his back to her, her use of his first name troubling him vaguely.

"Yes?"

"Meeting that boy, Billy Gaza, worried you."

Hunter turned. "He's not a boy," he said, "and I'm not worried."

"Clay Embree has enemies, doesn't he?" she asked.

"All men do out here." he said. He paused. "We're leaving at five in the morning. You'd better get some sleep."

She went into her room then, and he entered his. He stripped off his shirt, washed in the cracked pottery basin on the dresser, then slowly built a cigarette and walked to the window to watch the roistering night life along Red Rock's main street. He stood there, smoking quietly, when a sudden stumbling sound and the click of metal reached him through the thin walls.

He spun quickly, leaped across the room, and jerked open the door. A man stood across the hall, leaning on Stella Scott's door.

"Gaza!" Hunter said sharply.

The man turned and it was not Gaza but rather a cowboy Hunter had seen drinking in the barroom since early afternoon.

Hunter pulled him roughly away from the door and said, "You're in the wrong corral, cowboy."

The puncher tried to pull away. His face was red with drink and anger. "I know my room," he snapped.

Hunter jerked the key from his hand. "You're at the other end of the hall."

The cowboy took the key, matched its number with the one on the door, and the fight went out of him. "Sorry, mister," he said, and walked unsteadily away.

Hunter stood there motionless, and a little nervous tingle rippled the muscles along his bare shoulders. He stepped close to the door and said quietly, "Miss Scott."

There was no answer, and in a moment he returned to his own room, leaving the door partly open. Before he lay down on the bed, he took a revolver from his canvas war bag and put it on the dresser beside him.

He awoke from a light sleep before dawn, put on his shirt and boots, and went to the hostelry behind the hotel. He hitched a dapple-gray team to the buckboard and drove it into the quiet street in front of the hotel.

Stella Scott was waiting in the lobby when he entered, and in spite of the early hour she looked fresh and wide awake. He saw that she had brought her suitcases downstairs.

"We'll eat," he said "and get away."

He saw her hesitate, and then she asked, "Are we going by ourselves?"

Hunter nodded, his tan face expressionless. "I brought a Mexican woman cook from the ranch, but she ran off with an old flame before we'd been in town an hour."

Twenty minutes later they left the hotel. Hunter piled the suitcases into the buckboard bed and helped Stella onto the thin-cushioned seat. As he swung into the driver's position beside her, the hotel door opened and Billy Gaza came out onto the board sidewalk. He stood there watching them, but said nothing.

"You're up early, Billy," Hunter said.

Gaza laughed. "I haven't been to bed," he said.

Hunter flicked the reins, and the spirited grays moved out eagerly with the signal. He held them in until they cleared main street, then relaxed his tension on the reins as they took the west trail out of town. Hunter glanced back the moment before main street faded and saw that Billy Gaza was gone.

The trail was good along this stretch because it was much traveled, and Hunter relaxed against the buckboard seat. He watched the dawn throw its light against the twin peaks of the distant Owlhorns and cover the rugged surfaces with a rush of red and silvery-blue color. Hunter glanced at Stella Scott and saw that she was studying the color spectacle intently. He was intangibly pleased that she did not try to describe her feelings about it.

The trail narrowed and became rougher as they rolled deeper into the desert approach to the mountains, and the yucca, mesquite, and Spanish Bayonet grew more abundantly. Hunter silently tended his driving, keeping his eyes to the ribbon-like tracks ahead.

It was an hour before Stella Scott spoke. "Will," she said, "you don't like me, do you?"

The question caught him unguarded, surprised him. His eyes searched the smokey gray of the foothills below the Owlhorns.

"I like you," he said. "I don't like to take another man's responsibility."

"You think Clay should have come for me," she said. "You told me he was held up on urgent business."

"I said that," Hunter admitted.

"Will," she said, "I want you to understand why I've come out here to marry a man I hardly know. Somehow it seems important to me that you do. I wouldn't pretend to Clay Embree or anyone else that I really love him now. But he said that he needed me, and I was terribly lonely where I was."

Hunter kept his eyes on the wagon trail. "There are a lot more people in St. Louis than you'll find out here," he said.

She shook her head. "It isn't that. You could live where there are a million people and still be lonely if you weren't a part of any of them. I wasn't."

Hunter looked at her now. "You don't have to tell me about that," he said. "I know what you mean."

They lapsed into silence again, but after a while Stella Scott began to ask about the country they were driving through and

about the things that grew there and the animals they saw along the way. Hunter answered her questions with a quiet enthusiasm that revealed his understanding of and fondness for this land and the life it sustained. And slowly the tension that had been between them since their earlier talk ebbed away. By the time they reached the first rolling foothills, he was telling her easily some of the tall tales of coyotes and jackrabbits that were spun by the roundup campfires.

THEY reached a small stream at noon, and Hunter pulled the wagon off the trail. He unhitched the team and built a cooking fire in a small rock crevice. He spread out coffee, bacon, biscuit, and a can of corn before the fire.

Stella came over to him. "Let me do that," she said. "A man always fries the goodness out of bacon."

He smiled and moved away, watching her work efficiently at the fire for a moment before he walked on to the top of a nearby rise. He searched the flat, brown desert that lay behind them and was about to come away when a sudden faint glistening caught his eye. It was gone instantly and then he saw it again, and with it a dim shape moving. It might have been a horseman. The glistening might have been from silver saddle trappings or gunmetal.

They ate and the bacon was done right and the biscuits were warmed. Hunter rested the horses another half hour, and then they drove on. They worked deeper into the foothills, where scrub cedar and juniper grew on the slopes and the sandstone boulders became big and rugged. The red sun was poised on the two prongs of the Owlhorns when they made night camp deep in the jackpine country.

They were eating supper on a flat tabletop stone when the sound of scattering rock brought Hunter to his feet. A horse whinnied then and the rider came into sight around a jutting boulder.

Billy Gaza rode into camp and dropped from the saddle. "A hand-out?" he asked, looking at Stella Scott. He seemed not to see Hunter.

Hunter studied him closely. "There's some stuff in the pans there," he said. "What are you doing up here, Billy? You know there's nothing for you in the Owlhorns."

Gaza fell to eating wolfishly and did not answer. After a moment, Stella Scott stood up and walked to the buckboard across the camp. When Gaza shifted so that he could see her, Hunter moved between them and sat down across from him.

Suddenly Gaza stood up and flung the tin plate away from him. It clattered on the rocks, and his horse shied wildly.

"What the hell are you watching me for?" he said furiously. "What the hell do you wanta know what I'm up here for?"

Hunter took a step toward him and said with soft finality, "All right, Billy you've had your meal. We're shutting up camp for tonight."

Gaza pushed around him angrily and stalked to his horse. He swung into the saddle and pounded recklessly into the darkness beyond camp.

Stella came out of the shadows. "Has he been following us today, Will? What's the matter with him?"

Hunter shook his head. "Don't worry about Billy," he said. "What you need to do is get some sleep. I've stretched a pallet for you in the buckboard. I'll roll up in a blanket by the fire."

He left camp for a few minutes, until he was sure that she was in her buckboard bed, but when he returned he did not lie down by the glowing coals of the fire. Instead he took a blanket and his Winchester and went into the deep shadows beyond the fire's light. He sat down with his back to a flat, high rock and laid the rifle across his outstretched legs.

A coyote yammered in the distance and

was answered by one near the camp. But after that a vast silence moved over the hills, and the only sound was the quiet soughing of wind in the jackpine tops.

An hour passed, and then two, and Hunter could no longer fight the drowsiness that seeped into him from out of the silent night. His eyes closed, the rifle slipped from his knees to the rocky ground beside him, and he slept.

It was the soft, nervous blowing of one of the grays picketed nearby that awakened him. His eyes opened wide, and he did not know he had slept until he saw that the coals of the fire were fainter.

The horse snorted again and tromped restlessly. Hunter stood, picked his Winchester from the ground, and circled the camp, keeping to the darkness of rock-thrown shadows. When he neared the spot where the horses stood, his foot hit an upjutting stone and he stumbled forward, barely keeping his balance.

A sudden harsh explosion shattered the stillness, and a thin finger of orange flame spurted from the blackness beyond the buckboard. Hunter heard a whining noise over his head and felt a shower of sandstone as a bullet thudded against the ledge beside him.

He dropped flat, hurriedly kicked off his boots, moved along the ground for a few feet, then began a noiseless, crouching run toward the spot where the gun fire had blossomed. He heard a frantic, scurrying sound to his left and swung in that direction. He was upon Billy Gaza with a suddenness that startled them both.

Gaza spun sharply and tried to swing his revolver up, but Hunter smashed it from his hand with a vicious downward swing of his rifle barrel. He swung the gun up and around then, and it cracked against the side of the small man's head. Gaza staggered back, stumbling wildly on the rocks, and Hunter hit him again, knocking him to his knees.

Hunter dropped his rifle and leaped forward. He reached for Gaza's throat with strong, desperately grasping hands and found it.

"Don't!" Gaza whispered hoarsely. "For God's sake—"

"Will!" It was Stella's voice, and he realized that she had been calling him for almost a minute.

"It's all right, Stella," he answered her. "Stay there."

He loosened his hands on Gaza's throat. "Where's your horse?"

Gaza motioned feebly to a stand of pines a hundred yards away. Hunter jerked him to his feet and half pushed, half dragged him to where the horse was tethered deep in the grove. He pulled a rifle from Gaza's saddle scabbard and searched him for any other weapons.

"I'd kill you, Gaza," he said flatly. "I wouldn't mind a bit, but it would involve the woman. I'm giving you a chance to get out—and I mean out of the country. If I ever hear of you around here again, I'll hunt you down and kill you."

He shoved Gaza into the saddle and whacked the horse on the flank. It bolted away and was lost in the thick black night.

Hunter turned away, paused to pick up his rifle and Gaza's short gun, and walked into camp. Stella Scott was standing beside the buckboard watching him approach.

"It was Billy Gaza," she said, her voice trembling.

"Yes."

She came to him, put her hands on his arm. "Will, what is he doing this for? You've got to tell me. He'll come back."

"He had trouble with Embree and thought he saw an easy way of getting even," Hunter said. "He won't come back, Stella. Even a mad dog knows when to run."

He felt a shudder go through her. "I don't want to stay here, Will," she said. "Can't we go on tonight?"

"Yes," he said. "I'll hitch up."

HALF an hour later they were on the trail again. It was rough, slow going most of the time, with pines and overhanging cliffs shutting out even the meager light of the stars. For hours they drove in silence, Hunter carefully tending the team, the woman sitting stiffly beside him, staring into the night. But in the small hours of the morning, weariness overcame her tension and she relaxed and was asleep.

It was dawn and they were deep in the mountain country when he awakened her. They were stopped in the yard of a long, rambling cabin that stood on the edge of a sweeping mountain meadow.

Stella looked around her in surprise. "What place is this?" she asked.

Hunter helped her down from the buckboard. He said, "It's mine."

"Yours?" she said, puzzled. "Will—I thought you worked for Clay."

"I do," Hunter said, "but this is still my place. I sold off my stock last year and took over as Embree's foreman. I told you yesterday I understood you when you were talking about loneliness. I was no good here running this place by myself. I thought maybe I needed to get back in a bunkhouse like when I was a kid puncher. But that wasn't it, either."

Hunter made a cigarette awkwardly but did not light it. "A man can think straight when he's awake under the stars, Stella," he said. "I did mine last night."

"Will—"

"Embree doesn't need you or deserve you," he went on. "He'll never need anything but his land and cows and his power, and I figure he lost all claim on you when he wouldn't leave his cattle buying to come after you."

"Will," she said again and came close to him, "if I said I wanted to stay, what would you think of me?"

He smiled. He took it for her answer. "I'll show you," he said. He pulled her to him and kissed her.

After a moment she broke away. "It will make trouble, Will."

He lifted the grips from the wagon bed. "With Embree? A little maybe, but he won't fight because there's no cash profit in it for him. I'll ride over this morning for Preacher Jones and settle with Embree."

He took her arm and together they went into their house.

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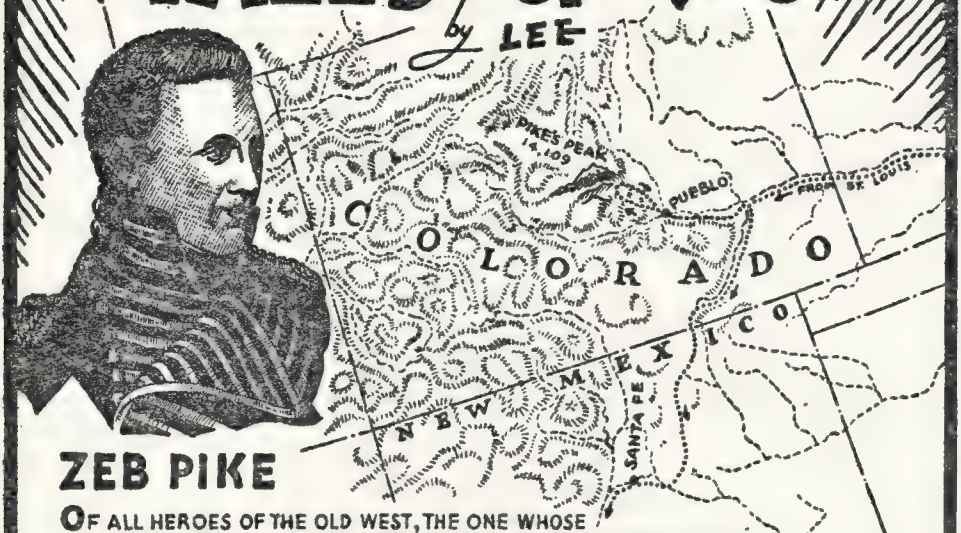


ZEB PIKE

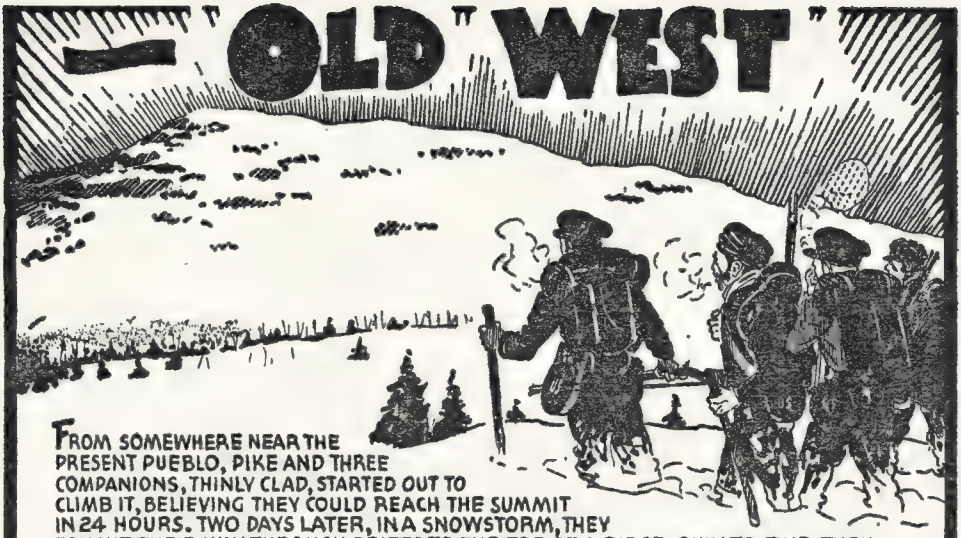
OF ALL HEROES OF THE OLD WEST, THE ONE WHOSE NAME PROBABLY STANDS HIGHEST IS ZEBULON MONTGOMERY PIKE.

AN ADVENTUROUS FELLOW, BORN NEAR TRENTON, N.J. IN 1779, YOUNG ZEB TOOK UP SOLDIERING AS A CAREER AND AT 15 BECAME A CADET.

FOLLOWING THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE, PIKE, THEN A LIEUTENANT, WAS ORDERED TO EXPLORE THE HEADWATERS OF THE MISSISSIPPI. IN AUGUST 1805, HE LEFT ST. LOUIS IN A KEELBOAT WITH 20 MEN. PUSHING UP THE RIVER WAS GRIM WORK. PROVISIONS RAN SHORT AND GAME WAS SCARCE DURING THE BITTER WINTER, BUT PIKE DID A GOOD JOB AND RETURNED IN APRIL.

THREE MONTHS LATER, HE SET OUT WESTWARD ACROSS THE PLAINS TO DO THE SAME FOR THE RED AND ARKANSAS RIVERS. IN NOVEMBER HE GOT HIS FIRST GLIMPSE OF "MY GRAND PEAK," THE MOUNTAIN LATER TO BE NAMED AFTER HIM – PIKE'S PEAK.

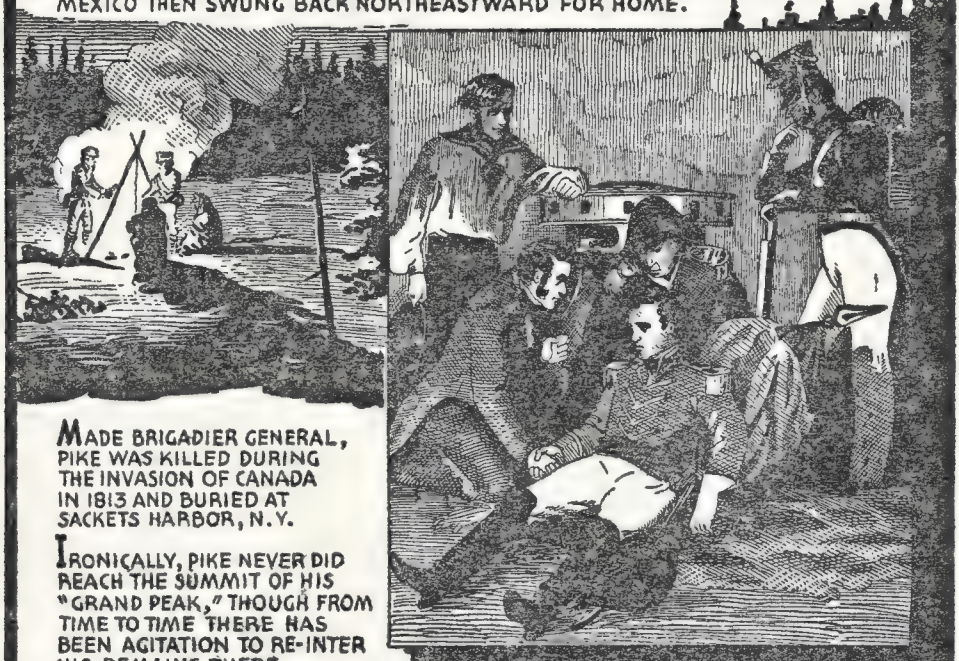
"OLD" WEST"



FROM SOMEWHERE NEAR THE PRESENT PUEBLO, PIKE AND THREE COMPANIONS, THINLY CLAD, STARTED OUT TO CLIMB IT, BELIEVING THEY COULD REACH THE SUMMIT IN 24 HOURS. TWO DAYS LATER, IN A SNOWSTORM, THEY FOUGHT THEIR WAY THROUGH DRIFTS TO THE TOP OF A RIDGE, ONLY TO FIND THEY WERE STILL 16 MILES FROM THE BASE OF THE PEAK. PIKE WROTE IN HIS DIARY THAT HE THOUGHT NO HUMAN BEING WOULD EVER BE ABLE TO ASCEND IT.

SEPARATED FROM THE REST OF THE EXPEDITION, THE FOUR PLODDED SOUTHWARD THROUGH THE SANGRE DE CRISTO MTS. BLIZZARDS SWEPT THE BARE CANYONS. THEY WRAPPED STRIPS OF BLANKET ABOUT THEIR LEGS FOR WARMTH. THEIR SUPPLIES RAN OUT AND THERE WAS NO GAME.

FINALLY THEY MADE THEIR WAY BACK TO THE EXPEDITION, PUSHED ON TO THE RIO GRANDE (WHICH PIKE THOUGHT WAS THE RED), PENETRATED DEEP INTO MEXICO THEN SWUNG BACK NORTHEASTWARD FOR HOME.



MADE BRIGADIER GENERAL, PIKE WAS KILLED DURING THE INVASION OF CANADA IN 1813 AND BURIED AT SACKETS HARBOR, N.Y.

IRONICALLY, PIKE NEVER DID REACH THE SUMMIT OF HIS "GRAND PEAK," THOUGH FROM TIME TO TIME THERE HAS BEEN AGITATION TO RE-INTER HIS REMAINS THERE.

60-136

The Ghost Patrol

By GEORGE C. APPELL

IT ENDED suddenly, abruptly. It ended in the scratch of a pen across the morning report, and then it was all over. "Duty to retirement." The first sergeant stood up and held out the pen. "Will you initial that, sir?"

Jonathan Lovelace released his stored-up breath, still fighting the thing as if he could prevent it. Thirty-eight years is a long time to serve. It's the full span of an adult, it's a generation plus a growing child. Lovelace picked up another pen, dipped it in a horn of red ink, and lined out the entry. "Retirement always begins at midnight, sergeant. I'm surprised you didn't know that." He initialled the red line carefully. It was four o'clock in the afternoon.

The yellow rectangle of the orderly room door darkened to the bulge of a figure in crisp new blues, blues recently unpacked, from the camphor smell of them.

"Your replacement, Mr. Lovelace." Jonathan Lovelace looked him up and down slowly, and found him not much different from hundreds of others like him. Young, square-cut, eager, new. And woefully ignorant. Smelling of bootblacking and silver polish.

The Army runway is a constant thing, thought Lovelace. *It keeps feeding at one end and spewing from the other; they can't wait to get you in, they can't wait to get you out.*

"Of course, my replacement." *Why should I feel resentment against this boy? Why should I want to throw him back to the States and let him lie there? You're a stupid old man, Jonathan.* "From the pool?"

The youngster banged his boots together and the spur chains chattered. "Yessir. Jefferson Barracks to duty." He swallowed, and added, "I'm a day and a half early."

"I see." Replacing thirty-eight years of service and knowledge and living with four years of parades and text books and clay piping. "You've signed-in? You've reported to the commanding officer?"

"Yessir. I was assigned to take over Troop C."

"Well, you'll find it intact." Lovelace sniffed once or twice. "It was Captain Hammer's, until three or four months ago. The only reason I got it was because the captain sliced his wrists with a razor." The replacement's eyes left Lovelace's silver tab and slid to his face. "He couldn't stand the monotony. You'll find, in time, that monotony is part of the Army, not foreign to it. Co-operate with it. What's your name?"

"Peck, sir. Kenneth Peck." He was gazing again at the silver threads.

Lovelace smiled. "Fifty-six men, Mr. Peck. That's all you'll get." But they'll help you learn, laddie. They'll teach you things you never dreamt of, back there on the Hudson's sloping cliffs. "Mind reading is a dangerous habit, Mr. Peck. So I'll answer your question: I am retiring as a first lieutenant because I failed one time, some years ago, to make an instant decision in the presence of a general officer. Decisions are a long time forming, Mr. Peck, but you must utter them on the moment. I learned that, but too late. I hope you won't make the same mistake. Do you drink whiskey?"

Peck hesitated. "Sometimes, sir."

This was the night that must come to every good soldier—his last night on earth, when dead comrades ride to his bidding—for the glory that might have been!

Jonathan Lovelace fired his fifth shot. . . .

"So do I. Sergeant Hobbs, here, is quite competent to hold the troop together for a few hours. We will share the heel of a bottle."

They walked across the parade, boots grinding dust. They passed the flagpole and pegged their salutes at the colors and headed for Officers' Row—a row of board shacks displaying brown tangles of heat-choked vines.

"You're packing out, sir? Or you meant you've already packed your gear?" Peck was being careful; they'd told him at the assignment pool in Jeff Barracks that loose questions sometimes brought strange answers, out here on the frontier.

"Why, packing out, of course. I can't stay here." Gray-skinned and gray-eyed, was Jonathan Lovelace. Gray-skinned to a hue that no weather could cure, no sun could parch. He wore his white hair cropped short in back, but let the sideburns curl to his ear lobes. And his voice, too, was gray—flat, rasping, like the scrape of a breech-block.

"Packing east, I suppose." Peck tried to sound casual.

"East?" They turned into Lovelace's quarters, stopped short and stiffened to attention.

Major Graves flapped a hand quickly. "At ease, both of you. Sit down."

"Perhaps I'd better—" Peck stepped backward a pace.

Graves shook his head. "Stay, Mr. Peck. Perhaps Mr. Lovelace can give you some advice." He faced around. "Jonnie, I came to say goodbye and good luck."

"You'll say it over a drink, I hope."

"I will."

Lovelace pulled the cork and set out three pewter mugs. "Too bad Cullinan's not here." He poured hastily, nervously, splashing whiskey on the table.

"Cullinan?" Peck queried politely. They'd told him, at Jeff Barracks, to keep his mouth shut, except when asking questions.

Lovelace threw the cork away and put the bottle down. "Got his first lieutenancy and a thirty-day leave, all at the same time. He'll come back full of oats." A smile sprang across the wrinkles of his face. "Nor will he be overage in grade for some time."

"He was at Sandy Fork with us," Major Graves explained.

And Peck opened his mouth and breathed, "Oh-h-h. . . ." Sandy Fork was all they'd been talking about, these last two months. At Jeff Barracks, when the general's body had come through in a brine cask on its way east to Arlington, it was observed that there went the only dead man who'd ever destroyed two Indian tribes at once. "It was Cullinan who found the body, wasn't it?"

"Yes, he and Sergeant Rory." Lovelace lipped his mug and tasted the whiskey, and felt better. "If you'll recall, the Santee and the Cheyenne were camped on the Fork, in two separate villages, to talk peace. The general went hunting alone, and he was killed instead of killing, and the Cheyenne mounted his body on stilts and refused to return it."

Graves nodded soberly. "At peace with the Army, too. We couldn't fight unless we were attacked by 'em—they, who'd attacked emigrant trains and ranches for ten years!"

Lovelace smacked his tongue on his teeth, and grinned. "So Cullinan took Rory and sneaked down one night when they were dancing in the Santee camp, and got the body. The Cheyenne found out about it, accused the Santee, and pitched into them. Not many were left—it was ninety-five percent self-annihilation, according to the Indian agent's report."

Peck had heard it all before, but never from the mouth of a man who'd been there, who'd seen it, who'd heard it and felt it. "Smart tactic, that."

"No, it wasn't." Lovelace frowned at

his whiskey. "It was the sort of tactic that . . . that gets you promotion and leave if you bring it off, and—" he switched his eyes to Graves "—censure and messy death if you don't."

The major cleared his throat noisily. "We were prepared to meet that messy death, Jonnie."

"For what? For a general who'd been—" He gulped the whiskey, holding the mug over his nose, gulped and shuddered and refilled the mug. "Well, it's over. It happened. Major—my regards to Cullinan when he gets back. I'm sorry I won't be here to see him again."

Gently, Graves asked, "You're leaving now?"

"Tonight."

"You can leave whenever you wish, if that's what you've decided."

"That's what I've decided." Lovelace was morose, now. Morose and hurtful of eye and sorry of mouth, and with no excuse to balance it in his mind. It was past, it was gone. It had happened, it wouldn't happen again. *You old fool, who cares what you've done during the years? Who cares what you've commanded, what you've decided? What people thought of you and what battles you've fought in? The Army is now! The Army is the present, the immediate future! You might have fought at Sandy Fork, and gone out in a howl of fury and the impact of steel on muscle and with the brass blare of trumpets in your ears. But you didn't, for Sandy Fork was an Indian fight, a battle between two tribes, and all the Army had to do was watch. So your last fight was an observer's show, and there's nothing to mark your passing from the runway but a scrawl of ink in a morning report. . . .*

PECK coughed roughly, unaccustomed to the brown bite of liquor. "Ninety-five percent of 'em killed, eh?" He was wide-eyed.

"That's enough to make the country safe for 'steaders," Graves told him. "Though some are hanging around still, looking for their ponies or for loot or whatever they can find."

Lovelace glanced at him strangely, a new light in his eyes. "Hanging around Sandy Fork?"

"So the agent says." Graves drank deeply. "Where'll you go, Jonnie?"

"Go? When I leave?"

"Haven't you a sister, someplace? El Paso?" Major Graves looked directly at him.

Lovelace lay candle-thin fingers to his pale white hair and pressed hard, pressed until his knuckles flattened and his temples throbbed. Where do old soldiers go? Where can you go, after a life-time spent in the crucible of the service? What other life is there for you? The man you hated, the man who chained you to a silver shoulder-strap for the rest of your career, lies dead in Arlington, and even in death he cheated you out of a last chance to fight. You might have fought, out there on Sandy Fork; not for his body but against it. Fought to even things up, to die on the same field he'd died on. But you couldn't, you had to watch a younger man snatch that obscene body and cause the tribes to battle it out between themselves. You had to command the escort troop and ride back to the post with the ambulance, unfiring, unfired-upon—and cheated at the finish line.

Lovelace cracked his pewter mug on the table and stood up. "Southwest, in the general direction of El Paso."

"That's good. At night, too, Jonnie. Start tonight. It's safer in the darkness, some Santee or Cheyenne may be loose."

Jonathan Lovelace turned, stuck his head out the door and yelled for his striker. "Killian! Tell Sergeant Hobbs that Mr. Peck will take Retreat with the troop. Tell him, also, that I want my horse and a mule here at quarters by dark. And you,

Killian—stow my gear on the mule and run a lead-line to my bridle. I'll be waiting. You won't have to use the tie-rail. Take out!"

Peck came to his feet and tugged down his tunic. "I'd better get over there."

"Get rough as a cob, Mr. Peck." Lovelace thrust out a waxen hand. "They'll like it. They'll never let you down. And I recommend Killian as striker. Makes good coffee in the field."

First lieutenants do not rate a ceremony at retirement, they are sent from the service with an inscription on a printed line, a copy of orders and a handshake. Jonathan Lovelace cleared the post just after twilight, pack mule trailing behind, and in fifteen minutes he was out of sight in the moonless night.

The gates clacked shut, the slide-bar rattled through the hasps, and the post fell silent on the silent prairie.

"He doesn't seem very happy, major."

"Mr. Peck, he'll never be happy so long as he lives. Which is why I intend to ride out, at dawn, and check his trail. I want to make sure he's headed for Sublette's Trace, which will put him straight for El Paso."

"At dawn, sir?"

"There's little danger at night—and besides, I believe he wants to be alone for awhile."

Mr. Peck nodded, though he didn't understand. "If I may accompany the major? Mr. Lovelace went south, and south is Sandy Fork. I'd like to see the field."

Jonathan Lovelace rode slowly down the long, night miles, buckskins soft on a skin hardened to the raw file of flannel. He rode easily, sitting slightly sideways, ungloved hands limp on the reins. A million miles of stars were scattered overhead, and their icy quiet suited his mood perfectly. There was no sound near him except the chucking of hooves in sand and the whimper of leather and the fluttering gasp of the mule's breath behind him. Though the night was warm, he felt cold inside, cold and strangely taut, and he was surprised to feel his stomach muscles tremble—like the gut-shudder of a winded calf.

"Age," he whispered—though he was only sixty. Exhaustion would have been the better word. Fatigue, after nearly forty years of heat and sand, sunblast and wind; of threat, too. Threat from whistling sleet, treacherous blizzards—and flashing war axes and unseen ambush.

The moon was directly over his hat brim, and he pulled a stem-winder from his pocket, snapped open the case and saw that it was a few minutes past midnight. He closed the case and put the watch back in his pocket. Truly now, he was a civilian, no longer subject to Army regulations or military directives. *I don't have to wait to be attacked before I can fight! I can choose any scrap I want. . . . But who'll attack a lone old man plodding down the distances toward nowhere?* Who would there be for him to attack? It was a peaceful Territory, with wagon trains coming in. It hadn't taken them long to react to the destruction at Sandy Fork. Roll west, and lay your transit and shoot your line and sink your marker. Build your barns, plant your crops, turn out your stock. And if an Indian still lurked, catch him in your cross-hairs and blow him out and send him to join all those others who groped through the mists of the Valley in the sky. . . .

A coyote fluted his wail upward, sobbing to the moon.

Jonathan Lovelace sighed, and shifted weight in his saddle, and felt a great restlessness of soul. There was something yet undone, something in him that remained to be finished. Pride, he supposed it was. Pride in what had been accomplished, resentment at what remained unfinished. Is death by gunsmoke too much to ask, after decades of honorable service? Is it so

strange that a man with no home in his heart save the one he'd just left should wish to die with the guidons—up front, with the trumpet's tattered scream rending through his ears? There had been so many before him, and at so many different places. At Donelson and Antietam and Fredericksburg, at Chancellorsville and Chickamauga and Missionary Ridge, at Cedar Creek and the Wilderness.

Did he hear a trumpet, someplace in his soul? Could he see, faintly echoing in his eyes, columns of infantry with field music and colors, cavalry flung right and left by battalions, artillery growling through red dust with tight hames and whirling wheels?

Or had that trumpet been the coyote's bleat, and the vision of massed men merely the flicker and slide of desert shadows moved by the march of the moon?

He was blinking, of a sudden, and his throat was blocked by a salty lump and he tore the tears from his cheeks with an angry sleeve. *Mr. Peck—command those men! Mould them, as they will mould you, and if your decisions are right and you don't flinch, you can make your fifty-six yellow legs into five hundred, five thousand!*

The dawn was chill on Jonathan Lovelace, chill as the wells of his being, and he rode up to a shelf of flatrock and swung off and did knee bends and beat his arms back and forth until he was warm again. He pin-grazed his horse and put his mule on a hobble and proceeded to make camp. It was no surprise to him at all that he was in the valley of Sandy Fork; he'd known, in the back places of his cognizance, that he'd be coming this way, leaving Sublette's Trace to eastward.

His fire began to smolder and smut, smolder and smut, and he set down coffee and fondly remembered Killian. He broke out some bread and threw bacon in the pan and watched it curl and twitch. He slid the pan off the coals, fed his animals, groomed them, and watered them; and when he came back, his bacon was done the way he liked it. The coffee tasted good.

Tobacco solaced him, and through the smoke of the cheroot he gazed west down the valley, to where the charred lodge poles marked the burned tepees of the Santee and Cheyenne camps. Down there too, in the dog-leg of Sandy Fork, were the ranked-off cairns marking the graves of three hundred and eighty warriors who had hurled themselves against each other because of the body of a man better off dead. Jonathan Lovelace smiled at his cheroot, and told himself that whatever level of hell the general crawled over, no matter how torturous were the flames, the devil, at least, had made the right decision.

He exhaled lazily; a rudderless breeze grabbed the smoke and carried it away, and the valley was clear to his eyes. When the breeze was in the west, it was said, you could smell the chalk-dry bones of the warriors under the cairns—cairns at which the coyotes had worried, scratching and fanging. A fit condition for such a field, Lovelace decided, and climbed to his feet.

That was when the dust puff caught his eye. It came from a far slope, and reappeared at intervals—as if a rock had been kicked loose and was bouncing into the valley. He clutched for his binocular case, but, of course, it wasn't there. It was back in the supply room of Troop C.

The sun was behind him, and he scrambled to the crest of the flatrock shelf and extended his hands in front of him and formed an aperture with thumbs and index fingers. He squinted through it, gradually focussing on the figure coming down the slope in the wake of the rock.

An Indian, Sergeant Hobbs. A bow-and-arrow Indian, on foot. Probably trying to catch a pony he's lost. Indian ponies circle back, generally. You don't have to chase them far. Hobbs, form fours below

the crest. Stay off the skyline—no trumpet calls. Two extra bandoliers to each man, fifty extra rounds for each revolving pistol. One man in eight to fill and carry canteens. . . .

THE distant figure reached the valley floor and stopped, squatting, searching, listening. It was dark against the burnt yellow grass, dark and tense and threatful. *Send one man back to Major Graves, but like this: tell him to walk for the first two miles, in order not to raise dust. Then tell him to fly, Hobbs, and report contact with the enemy.*

Jonathan Lovelace lowered his hands and crouched below the crest of the rocks. His animals were on picket behind him, his cookfire was out and his cheroot was dead. He stuck it into his hat band, flung spit, and waited. He had all the time in the world, he had nothing to do but this.

The figure rose, turned north and south, east and west, then picked its way toward the dog-leg and the black circles marking the burnt tepees. *A Cheyenne, Hobbs. Hungry, too, from the looks of his ribs. That'll mean he's irritable.*

The Cheyenne searched the crisp grasses; he inspected the cairns, he peered into the creek bottom. He stood on the bank and stared east toward the flatrock.

We can avoid an engagement, Sergeant. We can wait it out here 'till the enemy's gone, as surely he must, or we can indicate our desire to join combat. The odds are exactly even.

But the enemy is on foot, sir. The enemy fights on foot.

Then, by God, we will fight on foot. Messenger get off to the major? Extra ammunition issued? Canteens filled? Sergeant Hobbs, bring up the column and follow me.

Jonathan Lovelace rose quickly, slapped his holster, and stared back at the Cheyenne, a mile distant. He filled and emptied his lungs half a dozen times, opened his holster flap and strode west off the flatrock, west toward the dog-leg of Sandy Fork.

The sun silhouetted him, in the Cheyenne's eyes. It showed him coming sharp and clear, arms swinging, hat cocked to the right and the set and color of the hat told the Cheyenne that here came a white pony soldier like those two-moons-ago pony soldiers who'd stolen the body of a prized enemy and caused the Cheyenne to fall on their friends the Santee, to the ultimate embarrassment of both camps, and to their virtual self-destruction. Soft for the killing, was this single man. Revenge, on this foodless, ponyless morning, would be sweet as wood smoke, tasty as buffalo tongue.

Lovelace saw the Cheyenne drop into the creek bottom, out of sight. He lowered himself to one knee and snagged out his revolving pistol and rested it across his raised thigh. *Hobbs, we'll deploy left, south, around the dog-leg.*

What sort of a last fight is this, for you who have swung whole companies into action? A whole battalion once, that time at Spotsylvania? Why, it's a damned fine fight, on an open field with level odds. And while my fire power of six bullets with six more in the belt is superior to his wooden shafts, he'll have twenty or thirty of those, maybe more. At least I'll have no trouble with chain-of-command, with getting my orders down to lower echelons . . . . Hobbs—run fast, bending and ducking, to a point south of the cairns.

He arrived breathless, buckskins damp from the sudden springing of sweat. The Cheyenne was still in the dog-leg.

An arrow slipped across the sunlight and rapped off the rocks of the nearest cairn and slithered into the sand. Lovelace saw the flick of a feather and risked a shot. The bullet smacked into the opposite side of the dog-leg and sent dust smoking into the bottoms.

Feathery exultation lifted his lungs and

lightened his brain and made him see things more clearly. The Cheyenne was in the dog-leg, a hundred yards away, in the apex where it jackknifed backward. Between them were the cairns, and each had the sun on his flank, and wouldn't be blinded with it. One arrow away, one bullet gone.

Whose tones did he hear, echoing down the corridor of years? Whose voice was a slow growl coming from a shaggy beard? *"The heritage of our profession, its final justifications, is to stand ready, to deliver, to bleed and draw blood, and all the rest is plumes and silver and parade grounds and social nonsense."* Alfred Howe Terry, dour of mouth and humane of eye.

The second arrow ripped off his hat and pinned it to the prairie. He squeezed himself into the sand, pistol on grimy wrist, heels flat, eyes jerking left and right, left and right.

That arrow had come from up the dog-leg, from northwest along its length. The Cheyenne was falling back, retreating, and with a purpose. Lovelace guessed it, divined it instinctively, for he would have concluded to do the same thing—the thing that cavalry had been doing since the days of the Persians—cut out the other man's horses, put him on foot, make him fight dismounted, give the higher mobility to yourself.

The Cheyenne, from the northwest trench of the creek bottom, could see Lovelace's horse and mule behind the flatrock southeast.

Hobbs, we're up against the finest light cavalry in the world. It's not congruous that both of us are afoot, but the tactics remain the same. What we need now is mortar support—high angle weapons to lob shells into a depression.

He thought of the ricochet then, pondered its dubious value, and decided to use it anyway. He lay the barrel of his pistol between two knuckles, as a man will brace a billiard cue, sighted on the rim of the furthermost cairn to westward, took a breath and fired. The shot chipped rock and whined over the creek bottom and skipped from sight. The third arrow clacked into the stones one foot from Lovelace's face, and stuck there.

Lovelace sighted again, inhaled, and fired. The bullet struck rock and whurried fatly like an angry bee and flopped into the bottom. Lovelace began crabbing side-

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WALT COBURN'S WESTERN

wards, down to his right, eastward, keeping behind the ranks of cairns. Then he was opposite the lower arm of the dog-leg, and the Cheyenne was still in the upper.

He pried loose a rock, arced it, aimed it and pitched it. It thudded into the dog-leg near its apex. He threw another—and heard sand race into the bottom from the shaken bank. Dust fanned upward and dipped away on the morning breeze.

It worked. The tip of a strung-back arrow appeared from the blind side of the apex; a bronze, unpainted cheekbone eased into sight.

Lovelace almost blurted it aloud, *Sucked in!—And now we'll cut you off. . . .*

He held his sight blade on that cheek-bulge until it became an eyebrow, a temple. He fired and followed-through, eyes narrowed through muzzle smoke. The smoke melted, and disclosed nothing.

Hobbs, I think we winged him, nothing more.

. . . But he might be dead behind the corner, sir. Spun off his feet.

It's a chance we'll have to take. We'll have to use our mobility, yet stay between the enemy and our animals. He only has limited movement, while ours is free.

Lovelace crawled through the cairns to the rim of the lower arm, pulling with his elbows, pushing with his knees. The fourth arrow lanced the side of his head and flew on behind him and left blood surfing down his cheek, down his jaws, into his shirt. It was warm on his warm neck.

He had two shots left in the chamber, six on his belt. He rose and glanced swiftly at the field of Sandy Fork—at the jack-knifing creek bottom, at the silent cairns; at the place upstream where the Cheyenne village had been, and where the general's body had been elevated on a burial platform. He plunged into the dog-leg and dodged toward the turning and took an arrow full in the stomach.

Its punch snapped him over double. He was numb in the middle, though something was pricking his back. He saw the hateful mask of the Cheyenne's face split in a savage grimace, and he fired his fifth shot and saw a purple-white hole appear in the man's naked chest.

"There are his animals, major—down by that flatrock."

Graves' nod was curt. "He can't be far from them."

"The shots've been coming from west of there." Mr. Peck arm-signalled the escort platoon to close up. "What brought him off the Trace this far? Did he miss it in the darkness?"

There are times in an older man's life when the clown-reasoning of a younger man sends harsh laughter pealing through his soul. The major tried not to show it, though his lip corners softened a moment. There was no reason to tell this youngster that the general had been killed on the flatrock, and then carried down to the Fork. No reason at all. He'd make the pop-assumption that Lovelace, lost in the night, had found himself in that ghastly valley and had had to shoot his way out, having collided with some looters.

"There they are, major—in the creek bed. An Indian, and him."

Graves halted the platoon and spurred forward and threw off. "I saw his hat up on the prairie, Mr. Peck. Get it." He bent, kneeling, over Jonathan Lovelace, and he was smiling proudly. "Damned good shooting, Jonnie."

Peck came back in a scuffle of dust. He couldn't think of anything to say except, "Shall we notify his sister, sir? I can send a man back to cut in on the telegraph."

Major Graves raised his face, no longer smiling. "Confidentially, Mr. Peck, he had no sister. Mr. Peck, we'll pack him back to the post cemetery, where he belongs. Mr. Peck—assume command of the escort!"

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

By HALLACK McCORD

(Answers on page 122)

REIN up, pardner, and try your wits at answering the twenty Western questions listed below. Most of 'em are plenty tough, and if you don't watch close, some of 'em will dog-fall you for sure. Anyhow, answer eighteen or more right, and you rank right in there with the tophand boys. Answer sixteen or seventeen, and you're still good. But answer fewer than fourteen, and you're tenderfoot material for sure. Good luck!

1. True or false? "Hitching bar" is the cowpuncher's name for "saloon."

2. True or false? "Hoe dig" is a Western slang expression meaning a dance.

3. If a cowpuncher friend of yours told you he had just been to a *junta,* to which of the following places would you think he had been? To a meeting or council? To a cabin, far-removed from civilization? To an oasis in the desert?

4. When a cowpuncher uses the term, "ball of hair," to what type of animal is he referring?

5. True or false? A "mealy nose" is an animal with dots around its face lighter in color than the rest of its body.

6. If a cowpuncher friend of yours told you he had recently seen a *"mesteño,"* which of the following things would he be referring to? A mustang? An Indian known to hate cowpunchers? An oldtime Western doctor?

7. What man in an outfit is sometimes known as the "old woman?"

8. If a cowpuncher while talking to you referred to his "one-eyed helper," which of the following things would you think he was speaking of? A one-eyed human assistant? A six-gun? Any individual who was generally considered not too long on brains?

9. True or false? The term "ox-yokes" is sometimes used in reference to stirrups.

10. What does it mean when a cowpoke is said to "pack his gun loose?"

11. "Quirly" is the cowpuncher name for which of the following items? A whip? A cigarette? A tenderfoot?

12. If a cowpuncher told you he had just seen a horse "rainbowing," you should know that the horse had been: Bucking with his back bowed and shaking his head? Wallowing in the river? Prancing in the sunlight?

13. What is the meaning of the slang expression "ride like a deputy sheriff?"

14. If the ranch boss told you he was going to set you to "riding bog," what would this mean you would be expected to do?

15. "Sheffi" is a Western slang expression used in reference to what?

16. True or false? When an animal is said to be a "show bucker," this means that it is a terrific bucker, and very hard to stay with.

17. If the ranch boss sent you after some "splatter dabs," which of the following would you return with: A pair of spurs? Some inferior horses? A plate of hot cakes?

18. True or false? A "springer" is a cow that is adept at jumping fences.

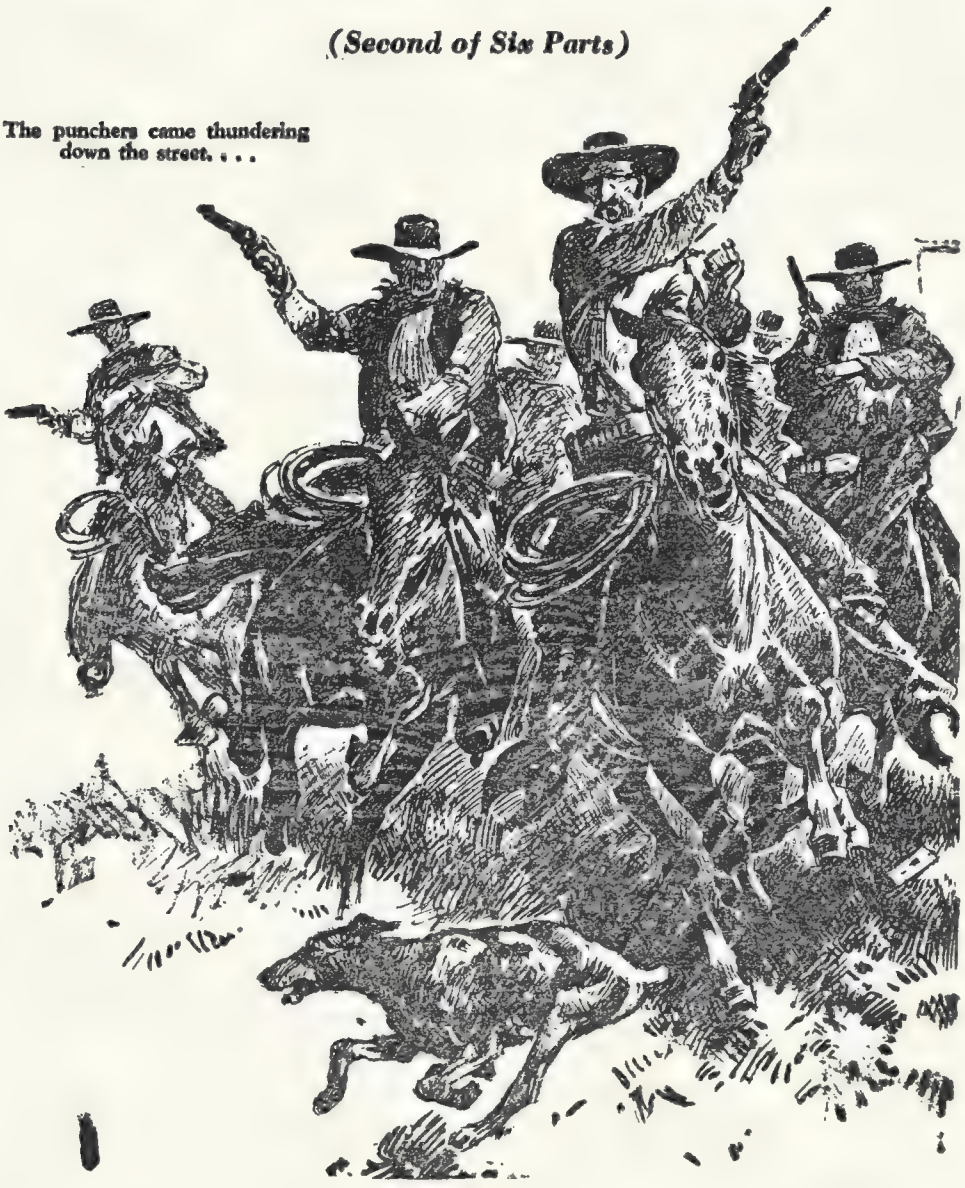
19. What is the meaning of the slang term, "stretching the blanket?"

20. True or false? A "sugar eater" is a greenhorn who has never ridden a horse.

Vengeance Valley

By RALPH ANDERSON BENNITT

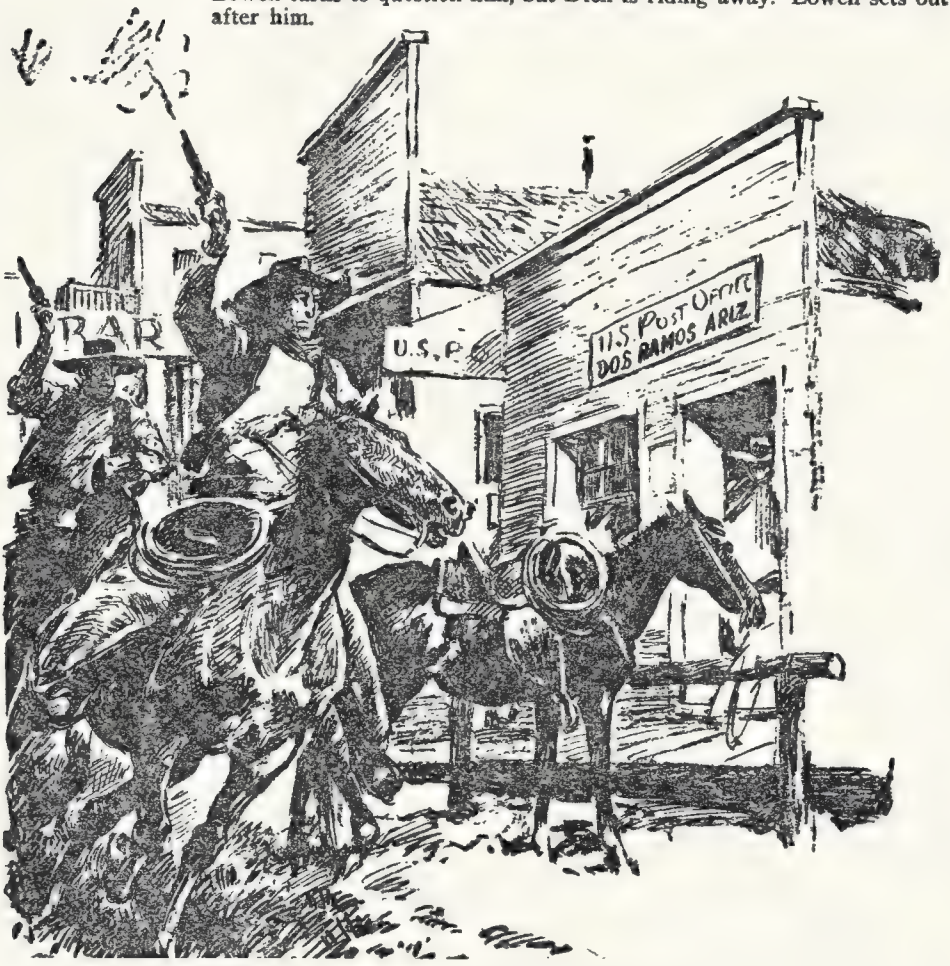
(Second of Six Parts)



The punchers came thundering down the street. . . .

The owlhoot boss craved a lawman to hang . . . the tinstars aimed to string up a lobo—and Ben was the one man this side of hell who could fill either grave!

WHAT has gone before: Ben Lowell has come from Montana to the Masan valley in Arizona to find Quince Kearney, who killed Ben's mother and crippled his father, John, twenty years before. Riding as Ben Lay with Kearney's henchman, Flick, Ben is involved in a train holdup. With the law hot after him, he rescues a girl, Jane, from a rattler, and her brother, Dick, a suspected rustler, from summary justice. Discovering that Dick is Quince Kearney's son, Lowell turns to question him, but Dick is riding away. Lowell sets out after him.



CHAPTER SIX

Troubled Puncher

THE black gelding tried nobly to catch the flying blue roan, but the big horse was fairly fresh, and he was carrying a light load, whereas Boots was jaded.

Lowell drew rein after a quarter mile. "Forget it, pardner," he said softly. "That kid, even if he is the son of a dirty outlaw, isn't worth breaking your heart over. We'll amble along and find a good place to camp."

Boots snorted and jingled the bridle chains and his rider spoke again. "That's right, feller. When we go in after Quince Kearney we won't sneak in like a c'yote pretending to be that kid's friend—nor his sister's."

A full moon which Lowell could not yet see was coming up at his right. There was a soft radiance in the sky, a peaceful beauty about the wooded valley which brought softer emotions. That girl with the laughter in her blue eyes in spite of her odd predicament! Jane. Quince's daughter!

"Lord," came softly from Lowell's lips.

"I hope dad was right. There's surely something queer about this Kearney gang."

He neared the fork in the trail up which young Dick must have gone a quarter hour earlier. Jane would have waited, worrying about her reckless kid brother. Perhaps she had followed down the canyon as soon as she could get dressed. Those two youngsters were nervy and would stand by each other.

"Howdy, Ben." The greeting was so soft it sounded like a faint stirring of leaves. Lowell checked the gelding and sat motionless while he peered into the darker shadows at his left. He knew who it was, and while he sought for words he felt the pulse hammering at his temples. "That you, Jane?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes. Dick is just ahead with the horses. I waited to give you back your slicker." She had a breathless way of talking when excited or alarmed. The yellowish light of the rising moon revealed her as she came around a huge boulder. Light of foot, graceful as some lithe woods creature, she came up to him with outstretched hands. A divided skirt of some light-colored material swayed with each step, and she was wearing a white blouse topped with a kerchief of flaming red. Against it and the darkness of her big hat, her uplifted face seemed pale.

"Is Dick all right?" he asked gruffly. He wanted to touch her hand, but a stronger emotion kept him from that simple act of friendship. He pretended not to see her right hand as he took the slicker. Instead he stepped down and tied the slicker back of the saddle.

"He's all right, thanks to you. He told me everything."

Lowell wondered if Dick had told all. Hardly. He would not say that those men had accused their father of being an outlaw. "They admitted they'd made a mistake," he said cautiously. "I'm not dead sure about those jaspers, though. Maybe you and Dick better be fanning along."

"Are they close behind?"

"I reckon not close, Jane. I spooked their cayuses before I left, and for a while Boots came pretty fast."

Jane cocked her head, but there were no sounds in the canyon. "I followed you as soon as I could, but it took me quite a while to catch my pony. I met Dick and he said it was you following. And—and, Ben, I just had to wait to thank you—for everything."

"I didn't do much, ma'am." Lowell averted his gaze from the loveliness of her face. *Quince Kearney's daughter!* "When you get it all boiled down," he said roughly, "it was Doug McCloud, foreman of the Tumbling T, who saved Dick."

"It must have been you who cut the rope." A faint sigh came from the girl. "I wanted to be sure you understand that Dick did not poison that beautiful creek. I drank some when I saw that snake beside my clothes."

Recollection of the startled nymph brought a chuckle from Lowell. "Next time, just heave a rock at the varmint."

"I thought of that." The girl relaxed a little from her tenseness. "But I was afraid he would come right at me. What you must have thought of me for being so frightened!"

"I thought—" He tipped back his big hat and scratched an ear, wishing he had the nerve to tell her she was the prettiest girl he had ever seen. "I just figured you were a dude from the East. A Western gal would have tossed a rock."

"We *are* Western born," Jane said quickly. "Dick and I were born in Idaho, but mother wanted us to go to school in the East. We just came home a week ago."

"Where's that?"

"Dad's ranch. And it's in the most beautiful valley you ever saw—the Big Masan River. Dick and I explored that, and we've been riding around getting acquainted with the rest of the country."

"Your folks had this place long?"

"Six months." Jane let out a slow breath. "They seem so happy here after—after wandering around so much. Dad is a cattle buyer, you see, and now he's stocking the ranch with blooded stock. You'd love it. Dick and I want you to come over with us and meet the rest of the family."

The urge to accept that innocent invitation was almost overpowering, and Lowell felt himself trembling as he put aside the temptation to use her as a means of getting inside Kearney's stronghold. It had never entered his head to give up his long quest, one which would end with Quince Kearney coming with him, willingly or unwillingly. There was a stark inevitability about that.

"I can't, Jane," he said after a strained silence.

"Why not? Ben, you act so—strange." She faltered, went on in her breathless way of speaking. "I thought we might be friends Your face looked so strong, so unafraid, when you came to help me. You saved Dick's life, and he thinks you're wonderful. Ben, what *is* the matter?"

"I guess I'd better tell you." His voice shook and to give himself time he put an arm about Boots' neck and slowly stroked the velvety nose with the other hand. "What would you say," he asked hoarsely, "if I told you a posse of lawmen was on my heels not long before I met you? That I fogged it across the New Mexico line with bullets whistling about me? That I left a dead out-

law on the trail an hour before you saw me? A man I carried on my horse?"

"How," asked the girl in a curiously strained voice, "did that outlaw happen to be killed?"

"He rode behind me when his own cayuse was shot," he explained savagely. "The bullet got him instead of me."

"So," she said breathlessly, "that makes three persons you've saved or tried to save today. I knew it."

"Knew what? Gal, you just don't savvy."

"Oh, yes I do." She laughed with an odd gaiety for all that her eyes were bright with tears. "Ben, you're no more an outlaw than —than father. Good night, friend Ben."

"Good night, Jane," he answered softly

There was a queer ache in his heart as he watched her running lightly up the moonlit trail. When she disappeared around a bend he mounted and sat still in the saddle.

Jane Kearney. Quince Kearney's daughter. He thought of a rarely delicate and beautiful flower lifting its head in spite of poisonous weeds all about. How could she be an outlaw's daughter?

Quince had settled down in that shut-in valley of the Big Masan after wandering around for so long, *buying* cattle. That's what caused her breathless intensity. She suspected the true nature of her father's business, was really trying to sweep away her own fears if not actually trying to protect that father from a stranger who might be a law officer. Quince had kept his children in the dark all these years. Dick must have caught on quickly and blurted it out to his sister.

Cold with dread, Lowell sat motionless in the saddle, listening. He heard the clink of steel-shod hoofs, subdued voices drifting back on the still night air, then he was alone. Alone with the moon and dark shadows. He laughed bitterly when the weird howl and *yap-yap* of a coyote carried across from the eastern mesa.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Talk—or Die!

NEAR noon, two days later, Ben Lowell boldly forded the gravelly bed of the Little Masan and cantered the black gelding onto the main street of Dos Ramos. The little cowtown straggled out a block or two on either side of the main street and petered out some six blocks to the west on the bank of the Big Masan River. The two streams joined a mile south of the town, beyond open pasture land sprinkled with low-growing oaks and sycamores. Willows and cottonwoods defined the courses of the two little rivers like heavy lines drawn on a flat map.

He headed Boots toward a livery stable near the east end of the main street. The horse bobbed its head when he stayed in the saddle after calling to the stable man, and Lowell patted the sleek neck.

"Keep your hair on, feller," he said softly. "I know you smell oats and sweet hay."

He knew too, that every man on the street had seen and admired the gelding's beautiful lines and four white stockings. Twisting in the saddle, he watched narrowly as a grizzled little old-timer came ambling across the dusty street. Pinned on his tobacco-stained vest was the star of a deputy sheriff.

"Where's the stable boy, mister?" Lowell asked. "I'd like him to give this horse a good rubdown and a feed."

"Eatin' dinner, and he'll probably be back directly." The deputy fixed Lowell with a stare that Lowell found disquieting. "Passing through, was you, stranger?"

"Not exactly." Lowell began rolling a cigarette. He was glad he had stopped for a bath in the Little Masan before entering town. He had beaten the trail dust out of his clothes and put on a clean shirt. He looked like any decent cowboy come to town for a celebration. "Wasn't that you I saw riding into town ahead of me just now?"

"Likely it was." The deputy spat out the open door as he glanced across the street to where his own chestnut pony was tied to a hitching rail. "You 'pear to notice things good, stranger. So do I. You can state your business, or let me find out."

Lowell grinned a little. "Being Saturday, I thought it would be a good idea to see the town. Matter of fact, I sort of figured I might meet Doug McCloud and maybe get a job with him on Tom Tate's Tumbling T."

"Oh, so you know Doug." The lawman's eyes grew more friendly, a point in McCloud's favor that Lowell did not miss. "Montana rig you got thar, ain't it?"

"Miles City." Lowell was thinking fast as he shucked off the saddle and began rubbing his horse's forelegs. "And Montana's where this hunk of crowbait comes from—while I'm answering questions."

"No need gettin' snuffy, young feller. Asking questions is my business. The name, by the way, is Jim Beck."

"Ben Lowell," Lowell said. "And right now you're asking yourself if I'm just some ranny riding a black horse or one of the train robbers who held up that train near Gallup, New Mexico."

"That's a good quess, stranger. An' you could be showin' nerve."

"It don't take much nerve to throw a few

ties across the track and wreck a train, and it don't take a hell of a lot of guts to shoot an unarmed fireman and brakeman either."

The lawman's hand went to his gun, but Lowell only glared at him.

"'Pears to me," Beck said, "you know a hell of a lot about that holdup, stranger."

"You're the third party who has practically accused me of being mixed up in it because I wear a black hat and ride a black horse." He grinned suddenly. "Sorry, Beck, but it's come to the point where you better hold off—or drag that gun."

The deputy eyed him with speculation. "Tom Tate's payin' fightin' wages for good hands," he volunteered.

"I'll have to see Tom. Right now I could inhale a pile of grub—after a drink. If you ain't shootin' me, how about a quick one?"

The old man shook his head. "Come on—I'll show you where you can eat."

Leaving directions for the care of Boots, Lowell hobbled down the board walk with the deputy sheriff. He was feeling easier than he had in weeks, even though he was not entirely sure this sharp-eyed old deputy had dropped his suspicions. He decided to bring matters to a head.

"What did you folks down in this country hear about that Gallup train robbery?" he asked as they approached the hotel.

"We got a telegram," Beck grunted. "There was five-six of 'em. One was tall, another about your build, the rest runts. To tell the truth, the only good description was of the jasper riding a black gelding with four white stockings. You look like 'im—brown eyes, brown hair, medium height. They claim he's fast as hell with a six-gun—an' has a big mole on his neck below the right ear."

The mole on Lowell's neck burned, as if somebody were holding a lens on it in the sunlight. He asked, "How about the others?"

"That was all the telegram said." Beck was walking on the left side of Lowell, and he looked at Lowell's neck. "Powerful funny they only saw this one feller good."

Lowell nodded. Not so funny. The tall one would be Flick. He may have concluded Ben Lay was a lawman, watched closely and intercepted that warning message to the railroad station agent. In revenge he had sent the damning telegram to Don Ramos, knowing Ben Lay would go there.

They reached the hotel.

"That's Joe Widener's shebang," Beck said. "Sort of a newcomer to these parts, but he's got a good Chink cook, even if the beds do git a mite sociable. Joe's likker is as good as Moke's Aces Up saloon, down yonder in the next block, but most of the punchers go to Aces Up because Joe don't allow no rough house."

The Ranchers' Hotel was a two-story building, the only one except for the bank at the next corner. The hotel could be the place where Kearney's gang hung out when in town.

Before they parted, the deputy said abruptly, "Dang' glad your name is Lowell. I was hopin' to catch me a train robber, but I'm glad you ain't the one. I was scared a mite back there you'd say you were Ben Lay."

"Is that the name of the jasper you thought I was?"

"Yeh. And the murdering son has a draft for five hundred dollars waiting for 'im in the bank, yonder." With a grin that Lowell did not like at all, the old deputy clattered away.

That bank draft. It would be on a Miles City bank, the town he had told Beck he was from. The little deputy was headed for the bank right now, and in ten minutes or less he would know that Ben Lay had also come from Miles City.

Jingling the lonesome coins in his jeans, Lowell whistled a mournful bar as he turned and opened the door of The Ranchers' Hotel.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Puncher in a Spot

JOE WIDENER was a cold-eyed man of middle age with black hair and wide blue jowls. He looked up from his place behind a knife-scarred counter when Ben Lowell stepped into the hotel lobby. Remembering Jack Rawling's instructions, Lowell raised his right hand as high as his ear. Lowell lowered his hand when the man behind the desk gave no recognition to the outlaws' sign. It was only when he reached the desk that Widener closed one eye in a wink.

"Got a room for me, mister?"

"What trail you follerin', feller?" Joe Widener asked after a pause.

"South."

"Uh-huh." Widener's hard-bitten face showed a sour grin. "How was the trail? Wet or dry?"

To give the wrong answer would be worse than none at all. "Hell with this rigamarole," Lowell grumbled. "I take it you're Joe Widener."

"That's me all right. What of it?"

"I'm Ben Lay."

"You don't say."

"Jack Gill told me to look you up."

"Anything else?"

"He was dying. Couldn't talk much. He rode behind me on my black horse with the four white stockings after we came away

from you know where. I had to leave him on the trail."

Widener grunted. He reached out a thick hand and pulled Lowell around. "Pull your collar down on the right side."

Lowell showed the big mole on his neck and then stepped back.

Widener looked only half convinced, but fell into a sullen silence.

Lowell said, "I haven't had a square meal for three days. Tell that Chink cook of yours to rattle his hocks. Have 'im load the plates plenty heavy. This meal is on—you know who."

"Depends," Widener said. "I saw you out there talkin' with that smart-aleck deputy pretty friendly."

Lowell stared into the fish-blue eyes. "Jim Beck started asking questions. He doesn't know whether to believe my little story or not. Told him to go for his gun, if he didn't. Now I'm telling you the same."

Widener relaxed "Go through the dining room and into the kichen. The Chink'll have his orders. I'll be along pronto and we'll have a little confab."

"*Bueno*—and call me Crowell."

Lowell cursed his bad luck in having given his right name to the deputy. This blue-jowled ranny would report back to Quince and Flick and then the fat would be in the fire. But old Beck hadn't seemed to pay too much attention as long as his name didn't sound like Lay.

"Fair enough." Joe Widener grinned.

Turning toward the dining room, Lowell increased his stride when he saw the deputy sheriff through the front window coming across the street. He entered the dining room only to pause in astonishment.

At a table next to a street window sat Jane and Dick Kearney.

Dick's back was quartered to Lowell, but the girl saw him. He saw her eyes widen, saw the beginning of a pleased smile which died when he raised a warning finger to his lips.

Then, because a beefy-faced cattle man was staring, Lowell sat down near a rear table and beckoned to a waiter.

"Joe said I could wash up out in the kitchen. Where is it?"

"Straight back," the waiter said.

Lowell stood up, turned toward the kitchen. The cook had his orders. His face as expressionless as a Bhudda idol, he pointed his butcher knife to a pantry at once end of the big kitchen.

"Little small loom alongside steps," he said. "Glub come *plonto* on dumb-waitel. All waitels dumb."

Lowell opened the pantry door and saw a stair leading down. The pantry door was thick and it had a heavy hasp and padlock. He picked up a candle, lighted it, and went down the stone steps.

Halfway to the bottom he heard the rattle of the lock, swore softly, and went on down. There was another heavy door at the foot of the stair. He blew out the candle, lifted the latch and kicked the door open. Nothing happened.

He relaxed a little, relighted his candle, then a bigger candle pasted on a long table in a fair-sized room. A wide wooden chute, open at the bottom—the dumb waiter—was in the opposite wall. While he was examining it, a tray came down with his meal. A half bottle of whiskey and two glasses were with the food. The liquor was not only a welcome addition, but he felt he had made progress with the highly cautious contact man for the outlaws.

The sharp edge of his appetite was only partly dulled when he heard a faint creak behind him. The sound came from the dumb waiter, not from the door he had barred. He blew out both lights and drew his gun as he glided to one side of the dumb waiter.

"It's Widener, Ben. Light up; I'm alone."

The hotel man was in a more jovial mood. Filling the two whiskey glasses, he sat on a bench on the opposite side of the table.

"A mite jumpy, ain't you, Ben?" he remarked.

"Maybe I have reasons. What did you tell Beck?"

"Like you said, he wasn't paying attention." Widener let out a soundless laugh. "He didn't have your name right when he asked where you were. 'You must mean Crowell, mister Beck,' I says, real polite. 'Mebbe 'twas,' says he."

"Did he give you a line on anything?" Lowell asked.

"He said he wanted to talk with you. How about that?"

"Maybe I ought to pull out of town and head for the Big Masan."

"We'll talk about that later." Widener seemed satisfied, and watched while Lowell ate. Finally he said, "About now, Beck is peeking into Room Seven. He'll find it empty and the window open. Ben Lay has left our town flat." The hotel man gave another soundless laugh.

Abruptly Lowell became aware that Widener was keeping his right hand low, and when Lowell saw the man's upper arm move slightly, he knew that a gun was pointed at his stomach.

Lowell looked about the shadowy room. "Can anybody hear this talk?"

"Not even a shot," was the reply. "This place has been used before for private confabs. Go ahead—how was the trail—wet or dry?"

(To be continued)

BRUSH DEVIL

"The longhorn was too tough for hell, so the devil drove him out—" But Texans, undaunted, just put him to work, blazing the Chisholm trail!

By HARRY VAN DEMARK

TODAY there are even fewer longhorn steers in the once-wild West than there are buffalo—and there aren't many buffalo. In short, a typically American animal is fast approaching extinction. There are a few small herds scattered over a wide territory, but there seems to be no definite effort toward the preservation of this breed that was once numbered in the millions—that made wide trodden trails across the trackless Great Plains, and were responsible for the writing of some of American history's most lurid pages.

For without the longhorn there would have been no Chisholm Trail, no wild-and-woolly, hard-to-curry early-day Kansas cowtowns, such as Abilene, Dodge, Wichita and the rest.

History tells us that the longhorn was a Spanish animal, brought up from Mexico, ranged in the fertile Nueces Valley which forms the tip of Texas, left there when the Texans drove the Mexicans out and set up their own republic, though some Texas ranchers have been known to swear that "The longhorn was too tough for Hell, so the devil drove him out."

Anyway, the original longhorn was a mighty cantankerous beast. There are even records to show that one lone longhorn bull licked a small-sized army. That was before the nation looked to the West for its supply of beef.

It was before the effete Easterner had learned the belligerent ways of the longhorns, too, or the incident probably never would have occurred. War had been declared upon Mexico in 1846, and General Zachary Taylor was marching his army from Corpus Christi to Matamoros.

A soldier out on the flank saw a queer-looking creature—wiry, sleek, with lean legs and far-branching horns, peacefully grazing on the lush grass.

The soldier knew that it was a "cow-critter" of some sort, and his mouth watered for a piece of fresh beef. So he up with his rifle and took a potshot at the longhorn, which happened to be a young bull. Immediately General Taylor had a war on his hands before he crossed the Rio Grande.

The bullet nicked the bull and made it mad enough to battle anything that walked. Down went its head, up went its tail. The animal snorted a couple of times, pawed the earth, and then went into action. It had never seen an army before, so how would it know what it was up against?

Anyway, the longhorn bull charged its assailant—came at him head-on like a locomotive. The soldier threw aside his gun and legged it for the column, the bull close behind. Numbers meant nothing to that wild brute. It plowed into the marching outfit, turned and started through it lengthwise. In less than a minute there were fleeing soldiers all over the plains.

Old-time Texans hated and loved the longhorns at the same time—hated the

breed for its cantankerousness, its readiness to stampede at the drop of a hat, loved it for its courage and hardiness.

"No animal of the cow kind," stated Charles Goodnight, early-day Texas ranchman, who trailed many a herd of longhorns up to the Kansas railheads, "will shift and take care of itself as will the longhorns. They can go farther and faster without water and endure more suffering than any animal on the prairies."

And though the breed is nearly extinct, its blood will live on as long as beef animals are sent to market. For the longhorn, in spite of the millions that were driven up over the trails to be shipped to Chicago, Omaha and other points, and there converted into stringy beef for hungry multitudes, was not killed off—it was bred out.

Rancher Goodnight, finding the market off for range stock and the demand growing for animals that packed more and better meat on their carcasses, himself started to breed the animal away from its native lines and tendency. He crossed his stock with Durhams, the authentic shorthorns. Later the Hereford strain became more popular, together with Devons.

So, through many generations of crosses, the once lengthy-horned, lean-legged, slim-barreled, fiery-eyed, earth-pawing longhorn has become a docile animal, short of leg, short of horn, too—indeed, often hornless. But he packs more and better beef on his bones, which, after all, is more needed than picturesque belligerency.

But they can never take away from the Texas longhorn the place in history that is his. His very aggressiveness bred the type of cowman who could also survive where other humans would quit, without whom the West would have been a much longer time in settling.

Oh, Abilene City is a danged fine town,
We'll licker up and twirl them heifers all aroun';
Then back once more with mah bridle and mah hoss,
For old Jess Chisholm is a damned fine boss.

So ran one verse of the nearly endless old cowboy song, *The Old Chisholm Trail.* As a matter of fact, many a Texan had trailed longhorns up north and east before Jesse Chisholm brought his herds up to Abilene, Kansas. But Chisholm does appear to be the first to end his drive at Abilene.

Following Chisholm's tracks came thousands of herds, and the trail became a very notable course. From 200 to 400 yards wide, beaten into the bare earth, it reached over hill and through valley for 600 miles, a chocolate band amid the green prairies uniting the North and South. As the marching hoofs wore it down, and the wind blew and the waters washed the earth away, it became lower than the surrounding country, and was flanked by little banks of sand drifted by the wind.

As the end of the steel rails forged westward, the north end of the Chisholm Trail shifted to the west, but for many years the main route remained the same, although other trails came into existence.

It took a tremendous lot of sharp longhorn hoofs to wear that deep trail into the prairie soil—so deeply that even today sections of it can be traced in isolated spots.

A tremendous lot of longhorn steers passed through Abilene and its succeeding cowtowns. From 1867 to 1871, no fewer than 1,460,000 were marketed in Abilene. Then Wichita and Ellsworth took over and shipped 1,072,618 during the next four years. In 1876 the end of steel shifted to Dodge City and Ellis, and these towns shipped 1,046,732 in four years. In fifteen years these Kansas towns saw 4,223,497 head of longhorns pass through their portals.

So a mighty race of battlers has fallen and with it much of the romance has vanished from the cattle business.

BLOOD-FORGED

By STEVE FRAZEE

HARRISON GREER, of Canafax and Greer, world's champion doublejack rock drillers, was lying on his bed in the Sylvanite House, listening without interest to one of Pass Creek's drunken street fights, when the knock came.

He saw Tod Fleetwood enter the room as neither friend nor enemy, for Greer had no friends, and enemies are struck from the same sparks of personality that make friends. He'd seen the gambler around rich mining camps from the Coeur d'Alenes to Oatman, knew him as a high-roller who played his money rough and fast—a mining deal, a game, a girl, anywhere a gamble and reward lay.

The driller didn't speak. He rolled his head with its short-cropped blonde hair, as crisp as grass on a frosty morning, and his hard gray eyes plunged against the gambler's face in curt questioning.

Fleetwood was not a handsome man. There was too much bone in his face and too little expression in his liquid black eyes. But his smile was pleasant around the pale brown of his cigar.

He straddled a red, plush-bottomed chair, resting his arms on the back. "How long do you figure you and Canafax can keep on taking first money?"

Greer said curtly, "Till we lose."

"That might happen Saturday." Fleetwood removed the scarcely disfigured cigar from between narrow teeth. "The kids from Silver Plume may be Fancy Dans, Greer, but they're comers."

Greer's eyes were narrowing. "Spill it," he said.

"You can do your turn with the size of the purse, eight thousand, already in hand when you go on the rock," Fleetwood said.

They watched each other coldly for several moments.

"Canafax?" the driller asked.

"Your problem, Greer."

"Did you talk to him?"

"You know better," Fleetwood said. "Canafax loves those slaps on the back, the fools bellowing his name when the hole is down." His voice was soft. "It's different with you. You like the money, Greer. You want that ranch on the Piedra, the one that's going to the Texas syndicate next month if you can't plank fifteen thousand on the line." He tapped his cigar gently on his wrist and silver ashes trailed to the red carpet. "I suspect you took to contest drilling only to set yourself up in the cattle business."

Greer was sitting up now, staring at the gambler and hating him, not so much for speaking the truth as for knowing it at all.

"You're a little short," Fleetwood said. "Even if you win Saturday, your half of the purse is going to leave you still short, and you don't like to borrow."

There was something coldly inhuman in the way the man was looking into his mind, Greer thought.

"There's your ranch, Greer. No risk. You're going against the best teams in the world Saturday, and no man, not even Canafax, could say afterward why you and he happened to be an inch or two short."

"I'll think it over," Greer said.

"The odds against the kids are going to drop when the smart money comes in Friday from Silver Plume."

"I'll think it over," Greer said harshly. He lay down again. "Get out."

A hard-rock man is a gambling man—and Greer ran to form when he bet his tomorrows on the turn of a card—and his life on his blood-forged sledge!

Greer swung the hammer without thinking. . . .

Fleetwood hesitated, watching from the corners of his eyes, with his cigar poised before him, and then he clamped the cheroot delicately between his teeth and rose unhurriedly. "Let me know before the specials come in Friday," he said.

On Wednesday afternoon, Canafax and Greer finished five miles of a cross-country jog and paused to rest in the shade of the Bengal mill.

"Well, Gloomy Gus?" Canafax's clean smile streaked white across his face. He raked back dark hair that had tossed to the rhythm of his running and stood there grinning, two hundred and ten pounds of hard, explosive build, stripped to the

waist, tanned the color of a mountain lion in midsummer. He was agleam with sweat, breathing deeply but not fast.

"Satisfied with our wind?"

"Just fair," Greer said. He hadn't taken off his shirt and now it was plastered darkly against the plaques of muscle on his chest and arms.

"That means perfect!" Canafax laughed. Outside of us and those kids from Silver Plume, no team has done a lick of training since Monday."

"Those kids are the team to beat." Greer stared at a sparkling stream of arsenic water coming from the mill. This tentative laying of the groundwork for defeat made a nasty taste in his mouth, but logic said there was only one answer to Fleetwood's proposition.

"Too light in the poop," Canafax said, looking at the town and smiling at something in his thoughts.

They walked up Sackett Avenue, men hailing them as they went. Canafax laughed and waved and parried friendly jibes. Greer was silent, pushing the wall of his aloofness before him with hard gray eyes, and wondering why he held no decision.

For two years he'd tried to conceal the fact that he liked Marsh Canafax better than any man he knew, that he thought he trusted Canafax; but what would his partner do, or any other man, if Fleetwood's proposition had been put to him in terms that hit so squarely on a cherished plan?

Canafax liked to win for winning's sake. It wasn't money. A few hours of buying drinks for yelling men, a stud game, and then he was broke again.

They parted at the Warbonnet Hotel, Greer going on to the cheaper Sylvanite House.

Bathing in the zinc tub, staring at the whiteness of his arms above his sunburned hands and wrists, Greer asked himself just to whom it was he owed the skill and hard-gutted endurance it would take to win Saturday, when losing paid twice as much.

As he ate in the dining room downstairs, he heard one waitress tell another; ". . . world champs. That's Greer."

The other said, "He's frosty. That Canafax is the one I'd like to see real close."

THAT night, the boards in the big saloons said two to one on Canafax and Greer, five to one against the Cornish kids from Silver Plume. Small bettors made odds with each other to suit themselves. There were ten thousand men digging gold in Pass Creek. There was gold ore surfacing the streets, bright minted coins upon the tables—gold wherever men looked toward the hills. What was flung away one day would come threefold from the earth tomorrow.

With his mouth tight and muscles bunched in his hard cheeks, Greer pushed his way out. Gambling was for fools.

Standing unnoticed for a few moments in the Golden Gate, he watched the Irish team from Victor roaring at the bar as they bought for the house, and in a sag of weakness his mind went back to days when he had been on friendly terms with men, before a singleness of purpose had made him hard and scornful.

Someone yelled his name, and the Victor drillers howled for him to step up, but he slipped through the winged door and plunged into the jostling turmoil of the walk.

He owed nobody anything.

In the Bucket of Gold he stood well back from the railing and watched Canafax in a stud game with Fleetwood and four others. Two days ago, Canafax had been broke and had borrowed fifty dollars from his partner. Now he was riffling a tall stack of blues.

Somewhere before, Greer thought, he'd seen the smooth-cheeked woman with cool

green eyes who was standing now behind his partner's chair. She wore her black hair high-piled in curls. She wore her smile much better than the average professional grimace when she touched Canafax on the shoulder as he won a pot from Fleetwood. Cool and impersonal, her glance brushed Greer a few minutes later and then went back to the cards.

She was as trim as the polished bit of a contest drill, Greer thought, and twice as hard.

Back in the Sylvanite House, Greer lay on his bed and listened to Pass Creek building fast toward the celebration. He wrapped for purchase neat, logical thoughts which said that money bet against himself and Canafax would be easy, sure and doubled if he held with Fleetwood.

He packaged the thoughts neatly but the wrappings wouldn't hold.

At noon on Friday, he woke Fleetwood in his ten-dollar room at the Warbonnet. "No deal," Greer said.

The gambler finished his yawns and blinked lazily at his caller. "I knew that in your room the other day, when you rose to the bait and then stalled."

The thoughts rolled baffled rage inside the driller.

"For one thing," Fleetwood said, "you think you're a father to Marsh Canafax." He was smiling gently. "You think that cutting him out of a chance at money that he'd throw away in two days isn't right: You clinched it by telling yourself you don't want anything you haven't earned the hard way. You're too damned proud inside for your own good, Greer, but it suits you."

More than ever, Greer hated the gambler for being so accurate. "It suits me," he said.

In early evening, the odds against the kids from Silver Plume began to drop, for their backers had arrived with heavy money and strong conviction. Then too, it was no secret now that Tod Fleetwood had put thirty thousand on the kids the day before. By nine o'clock, Pass Creek was roaring in its granite bowl, with two more special trains due that night. The boards at ten said even money on Canafax and Greer, even money on the kids from Silver Plume.

Greer didn't like it, although he'd always said that contests were won on the rock.

In the Golden Gate, Tod Fleetwood came up to the driller's side and stopped. "Your partner was lucky last night." The gambler showed his narrow teeth. "He won about five thousand, mainly from me."

Greer said nothing.

"I don't generally lose, but the boy was lucky—awful lucky." Fleetwood looked at his cigar. "He bet the works on the drilling tomorrow. Bet it right, I hear."

The gray eyes held a hard, contemptuous look. A half interest in the Vindicator mine wouldn't be enough to bribe Marsh Canafax, but when Fleetwood moved away, an uneasy fear stirred behind Greer's eyes.

Unable to sleep, Greer went at midnight to do what he was sure Tod Fleetwood thought he was too proud and sure to do: to check on Marsh Canafax and ask about the bet he'd made. Even then the driller might not have gone but his mind had clicked to recognition of the woman he had seen standing behind Canafax the night before, Melissa Blanding. Three years before, she'd been in Goldfield, working in a dancehall, known as Fleetwood's woman.

The town was howling. Teamsters had sold their beds in hay barns and gone to the saloons to make a night of it; visitors who had paid one dollar to sleep jampacked on the sawdust floors of bullpens, had learned that rest was not to be bought. Except for the darkness, Pass Creek knew no night.

As Greer forced his way down Sackett Avenue, dynamite explosions along the railroad right-of-way were welcoming a late special.

Six men were sleeping in Canafax's room, four crosswise on the bed, two on the floor. The room was sharp with the acrid smell of whiskey. Greer kicked the pair on the floor awake, recognizing them as friends of Canafax from Alpine. They said they didn't know where Canafax was, that he had told them to use his room.

At the top of the stairs, above the dance-hall in the Bucket of Gold, a man spoke harshly from a chair against the wall. "You can't come up here, Mister." He started to rise.

Greer lifted him the rest of the way by the throat, and twisted his wrist until a blackjack fell across his feet.

"Where's Canafax?"

The guard's eyes were bugging. He heard, but he couldn't answer. Greer relaxed his grip a little.

"One—Room One!" the man croaked.

Greer hit him once, remembering that the side of the neck is soft and won't injure knuckles. He dropped the man back into his chair and went down the hall.

The laughter of two women sliced to silence when Greer stepped quietly through the door of Number One. One woman said, "My God!" but the other, smooth-cheeked Melissa Blanding, looked coolly at the driller and said, "Get out!"

"Where's Canafax?"

"Get out!" Melissa Blanding said.

Greer caught her with his fingers over her shoulders, his thumbs digging hard. He lifted her from where she sat on the edge of a bed and watched her face go white.

"Where's Canafax?"

It was his eyes and not the pain that broke her.

"Across the hall," she said.

Greer dropped her and deliberately wiped his hands across his shirt. A sly, cruel smile dragged at the lips of the second woman.

Marsh Canafax was drunk or drugged or both. He was sprawled on a satin cover, with his black hair and brown face sharp against a lacy pillow slip. As he went down the hall with his partner shoulder-slung, Greer heard Melissa Blanding speak from her doorway.

"You came a little late, Big Man."

In the darkness of an outside stairway to the alley, Greer misjudged the last step and put his weight down with just his heel touching the plank. The burst of pain around his ankle made him grunt in agony, but he held his feet and carried Canafax three blocks to the Sylvanite House.

Slapping and cold water brought Canafax to maudlin consciousness, but he soon passed out again. The bellowing of the town and pain in his ankle kept Greer awake most of the night. Canafax slept the whole night with neither groans nor snores.

He hadn't been drugged. He woke at ten o'clock the next morning, when Greer was trying to wrap his injured ankle after a soaking in cold water. He'd be all right, Greer saw, for Canafax had the resiliency of nerves and muscles that nature gives but briefly, even to spring-steel bodies.

But there was something out of pattern in the defiant look Canafax gave his partner. "I had a right to get drunk," he said. His tone put the blame on Greer.

"Lose your five thousand?"

"I see you know about that." Canafax hesitated. "I bet it. I bet it on the contest."

"How?"

"That's my business."

Greer felt a sudden tenseness as cold as the swollen flesh he was binding. He started to speak and changed his mind. Trust in a man went all the way, without verbal receipts to bolster your judgment, he thought.

IN A natural amphitheater near the foot of the Bull Moose dump, the block of Gunnison granite surrounded by staging was the focal point of thirty thousand eyes. Unmined gold could wait today. Like sailors in rigging, miners swarmed on the cross members of nearby gallows frames.

Trying not to limp as he followed his partner toward the staging, Greer observed that Canafax was not responding to the shouts. A burly, yelling miner pressed in to pound Greer's back and wish him luck, and his booted foot rapped hard against the driller's swollen ankle.

"Greer staggers like he was drunk last night too!" someone yelled.

A fight broke out near the rock. Special deputies broke it up and hammered the specators back. From the slopes above, the voices of thousands came in a ceaseless, bumbling roll. It was an afternoon to set Marsh Canafax to prancing, but his face was grim and he would not look at Greer.

Five thousand bet the right way, Greer thought. With time still left, he was too stubborn to press for answers. He ducked under a rope into a cleared space beside the staging.

". . . dead drunk last night, and Greer dragging a crippled foot . . ."

Someone else crowding the rope said, "I'll back the field two to one against the champs!"

Greer swung around and looked into the keen eyes of a wealthy mine owner he'd known in grubstake days. "I'll take five thousand of that, Bishop." Not in the saying, but in the calmness he felt afterward, Greer astonished himself.

"You're on!" the mine owner said.

It was a big price to back one's faith, Greer thought, and he tried not to think about the ranch. He turned to read the impact of his act upon his partner's face, but Canafax was drawing from a hat to determine what numbered square upon the rock would mark their hole.

Canafax hadn't seen or heard.

Looking between the Bisbee team as they went on the rock to lay out their drills, Greer saw Tod Fleetwood and Melissa Blanding in a buggy just beyond the judges' stand.

They were laughing.

Deep-chested, dark-faced men with Texas drawls, the Arizona drillers exploded into smooth motion at the sound of the starter's gun. They collared a hole faster than Greer had ever seen it done before, and he remembered that starting had been their weakness two years before. They were lightning in their changes at minute intervals, each getting in two strokes when no hand was on the drill.

They went forty-five and three-eighths inches, a new world's record, and the word went rippling back even before the hoarse bellow of the master of ceremonies made the mark official, and then the granite bowl of Pass Creek tossed up sound for seven minutes.

Marsh Canafax did not look at his partner.

Leadville's pride, the Terrible Swiss, were next on the rock. They were fair-haired men with chests like stallions. They hit the drill too hard, Greer thought. They tried to drive it through the rock instead of drilling it down, and yet in their fifteen minutes they sank an even forty-five inches.

Five thousand Irish howled with joy when Finlay and Brandon, the Victor team, went up to drill, waving their striking hammers high. On the seventh drill, the broken corner of a bit cost the Irish team their chance, although they wouldn't quit and went on to pound the broken fragment of hard steel to pieces with succeeding drills.

Finlay dropped from exhaustion when it was over, while Brandon sat on the staging weeping and cursing.

Four other teams did their stint, and only one of them fell more than two inch-

es short of the Bisbee drillers' mark, but none exceeded it.

Cheers mingled with hoots when the kids from Silver Plume climbed on the staging. They were too small! Did their mothers know they were out?

Brown-faced, with impudent grins, the kids from Silver Plume thumbed their noses at the world and got ready to drill.

Greer took out his stopwatch.

After the first few blows, the hammerman who started held to a clicking hundred and two strokes a minute. They changed positions in the time it took Greer to glance at his watch. He scowled at the steady jump of water against the protecting splashers.

Showoffs, yes, but their work was sheer precision. Neither of the silver hammers had varied more than a few strokes from a hundred blows a minute.

By then, the voice of the packed slopes had risen to a steady roar, and even those whose bets were lost already were cheering the most beautiful drilling run they'd ever seen. The kids from Silver Plume were not going to falter, Greer was sure, and he was right, for when each stood to his last turn at striking, the hammer held a steady silver arc.

"Forty-six inches flat! A new world's record!"

Canafax and Greer looked at each other for just an instant, and Canafax's eyes were still cold with a thought he wouldn't speak.

The whistle on the Moose shafthouse began to blow, a thin noise against the thundering cheers of the spectators.

Kinkaid and Woody, champions of the Coeur d'Alenes, two powerful columns whose interchanges were like the meshing of new gears, drilled next to last, their streaming faces set, determined. They beat the record of the Arizona men by one quarter of an inch, but still were short of the mark set by the Cornish kids from Silver Plume.

For a few minutes, Woody lay exhausted on the rock, while Kinkaid leaned trembling on his hammer handle and gulped for air.

With their drills laid out, the swamper standing by to feed a steady stream of water into the hole from a small hose, Canafax and Greer faced each other squarely for a moment.

"All set, boys?" the starter asked.

GREER wanted to speak, but he waited for Canafax, who moistened his lips and said nothing. Then they both glanced up the hill to where Fleetwood and Melissa Blanding sat in their buggy. The gambler was smiling gently.

"All set," Greer said.

He started the hole, with Canafax striking, and Canafax was striking too fast.

"Steady down!" he said.

The hammer blows came faster.

Greer changed the steel when it was yet ten seconds from his turn to strike. His ankle screamed in pain when he went up and Canafax went down to drill.

"Strike center!" Canafax's voice held a curse.

Greer knew he wasn't striking true. The savage impacts of the hammer were wandering beyond the dime-sized space that marked the center of the steel, which was only seven-eighths of an inch across.

"Center!"

Miners near the rock saw how close one stroke came to being a bouncing miss that would have crippled the twister's hand. They knew the shock that must have jarred up Canafax's arm when the drill went sidewise.

Greer knew then. His injured foot was turned out instead of straight ahead, and most of his weight was on his left leg. He shifted, balanced his weight evenly.

Their timer called the minute interval. Greer got two strokes at the freee drill while Canafax was coming up with his

hammer and Canafax got two strokes while Greer was going down to turn.

The black-haired man was striking too fast again, pinpoint blows that sent power straight to where the bit was chopping, eating at the granite, erupting water. No man could hold that power and speed for long, Greer thought, but he tried to match it when he went up to strike on the next turn, rocking on the balls of his feet, his ankle bellowing its pain.

The hole went down with muddy water gushing.

Striking, turning, drillheads sinking one by one closer to the rock—it was a blur of automatic motion with action stifling thought.

Pain at last supplied its own anesthetic in Greer's ankle, but now there wasn't enough air in the world to feed his tortured body, even during the intervals when he was turning.

They were on their twelfth piece of steel when it came to Greer that his trust in Canafax was sound, that Canafax had mistrusted him also. Sometime later, when his arms were dead and his lungs were bursting, Greer saw the fourteenth drill lifted straight out of the hole and flung high. The last one started down, fifty heavy inches of steel.

Canafax was slow. The hammer caught the drillhead before the bit was bottomed. Blood spread with muddy water on the turner's hand. He went on twisting till the timer called the last minute.

On his knees, Greer wagged his head to throw sweat from his face. An awful roaring sound was all around him.

Two blows fell weakly. Another strayed and caught the outside of the drill. Greer raised his head wearily. He saw Marsh Canafax's sweating face, his bloodless lips that gasped for life.

Canafax tried to hit the drill once more. He fell as if the weight of the hammer had jerked him down. The swamper, a big man, untired, alert, broke the fall. Somewhere a gun went off, close-hemmed by other noise.

When Canafax was sitting up, his hands limp across his knees, he turned his head toward Greer with a faint smile.

"We thought — we t h o u g h t each other—"

"We did," Greer said.

Two judges were spooning out the hole. Another held the bright steel measuring rod, and his hands were shaking. The tape went down. The judges bumped their heads and muttered and put it down again.

"Forty-six and a half inches!" one said.

For the first time Greer really heard the crowd, and the sound helped loosen something in him that had been tight and knotted for a long time. He saw beyond the purse, but he didn't forget the purse by any means.

"What odds did you get?" he asked.

Canafax grinned. "Even money."

"I did better than that."

Scatching at prickling sweat in the muscle-cushioned crease of his back, Canafax paused and stared. "You mean *you* bet on us too?"

"I did."

They began to laugh. Trying to force his buggy through the crowd on the hill, Tod Fleetwood looked down at the rock and cursed blackly. Canafax grinned and waved.

Cheers were a warming thing, Greer thought, but his practical mind was looking far ahead. A partner on the Piedra would be an asset, particularly if he happened to be a friend also. Ranch-born himself, Canafax had hinted several times just what Greer was thinking—and now he had the money and it was up to Greer to see he kept it.

"We'll never beat those kids from Silver Plume again," Greer said. "We'd better quit."

Canafax admitted that just before the crowd came up and carried the champions away.

Johnny landed one on Ran's chest. . . .

THE boys surprised everybody around Mydas Basin with the way they got along with their partnership claim up Colton Creek. Not that they hadn't been friends as kids, but there had been the old feud, for years, between the Nemos and the Bracks, and everybody agreed that this old trouble would crop up sooner or later between the two and break up their partnership.

Everybody agreed, however, that the boys would be crazy to fight between themselves over anything. Johnny Brack and Rans Nemo had the sweetest setup two gold partners could have. They worked when they felt like it, got good yields for their efforts, took time off to play a little poker and do a little drinking, and they took in every rodeo and Fourth of July celebration for a hundred miles in any direction.

As to this friendship and the lack of enmity between the two boys, everybody agreed on one point. The reason that the

Showdown Street

By ROBERT J. HOGAN

two partners got along so well was mostly because Johnny Brack was a mighty easy-going young man.

Johnny was tall and good looking and peaceful and quiet. He carried ammunition to shoot rattlesnakes and coyotes and maybe mountain lions.

Rans Nemo was spunky. He was a blocky young devil with stiff black hair and a cannonball-shaped head and wide-set eyes. He carried a pair of pearl-stocked guns hung low along his legs and he swaggered when he walked. He was the aggressor of the two. If they picked up a couple of girls at a celebration, Rans was the one who talked to the girls first and arranged it. Anybody would tell you that Rans Nemo could be hell on two legs come a fight or a frolic.

Most everybody guessed that the secret of their getting along so well together was that Johnny was peaceful and good natured. But the day came when Johnny lost his good nature and Rans raised his stock of belligerence, and it all started when Polly Vance, the new schoolteacher, arrived in town.

Jeb Thompson, head of the school board, met her at the station with his freshly carried bay team hitched to his newly varnished buckboard.

Johnny Brack and Rans Nemo were there too.

The trip had started as a kind of excuse for a day off for both of them. They had heard that the schoolmarm was coming on the train, so they'd knocked off to come down and look her over.

Polly Vance surpassed expectations to a considerable degree. The boys stood and stared at the beautiful young woman until Jeb Thompson, out of a sense of decency, introduced them. Then all three helped Polly Vance into Jeb's buckboard, Jeb got in and the boys mounted, and they started up Main Street from the station.

The Citizens of Mydas Basin paused to stare and smile at the brief but tense little procession. The merchants came out of their stores to get first glimpse of the new schoolteacher. They smiled at the two young men on their horses, trailing behind and at either side of the rig.

To some, Johnny and Rans might have looked a little like a small cavalry escort moving up with the new schoolteacher. To others, they might have looked more like a couple of hungry hounds trailing the Thompson rig.

Now and then, Johnny looked at Rans and Rans looked at Johnny, and those watching could tell that enmity had arisen between the two.

All the watchers knew that the boys had one thing in mind regarding Polly Vance. Each was planning to ask her to go to the dance tomorrow night and she most likely wouldn't go with either.

The boys swung their horses off the tail of the buckboard as they came to the general store. They tied their horses to the hitching rail, took one more glance at

Rans Nemo and Johnny Brack stuck pretty close together, but it only took one minute, as the lead flies, to get them closer than they'd ever been—a bullet's length apart!

the sun, glinting golden off the blonde hair of the school teacher as she moved up to her boarding house and school.

They went into the general store and Rans said, "What you got in new neckerchiefs? I want a real bright one."

Johnny Brack said, "I'd like to see a bright one, but not so loud as the one Rans wants. Some folks taste is all in their mouth."

Rans Nemo's little eyes blazed at him. He turned. "Lookahere, maverick," Rans said. "You got no license to trail me around and see what I do."

"You got no license doing what you're doing in the first place," Johnny said. "We agreed. I said we'd toss and—"

"That was before I got a good look at her," Rans said. "Polly Vance ain't any woman to be tossing cartwheels over. She's the prettiest—"

"She sure is," Matt Ballard said over the counter. "If I was twenty years younger, I'd give you boys a run for your money with her. Now this red kerchief is the brightest thing we got, Rans. Like it?"

Rans eyed it. He said, "Maybe I'd like one not so bright."

"Who's trailing who now?" Johnny said.

"Shut your mouth," Rans said. "I'll take that one." He pointed to a mottled brown number. "It'll go good with my brown chaps." He paid for it and tied it around his neck in front of the little mirror on the back wall.

"I'll take the red one," Johnny Brack said, and he grinned when he said it. "I reckon maybe she'd like bright colors after all."

Rans Nemo cursed under his breath. He turned and gave Johnny a look that would hang a sheep, and he said, "I'm getting out of here—and don't nobody by the name of Brack follow me, or there's going to be plenty trouble!" He clumped out.

Johnny Brack laughed, but only on the outside. The proprietor laughed with him. Matt said, "That's the slickest trick I ever see a man pull on another over a woman."

Johnny watched Rans out and down the street. He didn't turn toward the school house. There wasn't much sense in that now. The kids were riding in to school and a man wouldn't stand in front of a classroom full of kids and say, "I'd be mighty pleased if you'd go to the dance with me tomorrow night, ma'am."

Matt said, "You fellas are getting pretty mad about that girl. Can't say that I blame you, though. She's a beauty, all right."

"Rans is just sore because I won the toss of the silver dollar," Johnny said. "He kept kidding me about her until he saw her."

"What you going to do about it?" Matt said.

"Wait and see," Johnny winked, but inside he wasn't too sure himself, because he was getting worried. Rans had a way of getting damn nasty about things he wanted real bad, although that wasn't very often. They'd got along good working the claim together, and when they'd find a couple of nuggets and come to town to spend them on a good time.

JOHNNY went out with his red kerchief tied around his neck. He looked both ways, up and down Main Street. He expected to see Rans coming out of the Empire Saloon, but instead he saw him at the schoolhouse door, talking to Polly Vance.

"Well, damn me," Johnny said. He got on his horse and rode over to Rimrock, and, this being Friday, he got good and drunk, but he was back by Saturday afternoon, pretty well sobered up. He cleaned up in a room over the Empire Saloon, and when the dance started that night at eight, at the school-house, there was John-

ny waiting at the door when Rans and Miss Polly Vance came strutting in.

Johnny smoothed his slicked-down, straw-colored hair and said, "How're you this fine evening, Miss Polly?" When she asked him who he'd come with, he stammered around until he thought of saying, "Why I just came to dance with you Miss Polly." It came out so easy that Johnny was surprised himself. After all, he'd never talked to anybody that nice before in his life.

"I'm flattered, Mr. Brack," Polly said. "You'll have the second dance, I'm sure."

That was the way things started, with Rans dancing the first dance with her and then Johnny taking her over for the next waltz. Then it got to be a free-for-all, just like a fight, with Rans cutting in on Johnny and Johnny cutting in on Rans. It went on like that until time for the fiddler to quit.

Then, when she was dancing almost the last dance with Johnny, Polly Vance suddenly said, "Johnny, I'd like for you to take me to church tomorrow afternoon at three. The riding minister—"

"Church?" Johnny said, as if she'd mentioned a foreign country he'd never heard of.

"Of course," she said. "The new riding minister is coming through in the afternoon to have services in the school house, and everybody is supposed to be there."

That night, Johnny Brack went back to his room he'd rented over the Empire Saloon feeling pretty good. It was difficult to believe that Polly Vance had come right out and asked him herself.

He slept late, went over to Jeff Kenyon's restaurant about noon, sat on a stool and ordered double ham and eggs and fried potatoes and biscuits.

He was sitting there enjoying himself and feeling how nice it would be to sit next to Polly Vance of her own asking, even during a church service, when in walked Rans Nemo. Rans looked like a dude out of the pages of a mail order catalogue.

The two eyed each other and Rans said, "I thought you was going back to the claim last night."

Casually, Johnny said, "I changed my mind. Figured I'd stay in town. Got a little social business to take care of this afternoon." He shoved back his empty coffee cup and got up slow. "Reckon I better go and get slicked up for it," he said casually.

Rans watched him go out. He didn't say anything.

By a quarter to three by the big ticking clock over the Empire Bar, Johnny was strolling up the street toward Jeb Thompson's house, where the school teacher was boarding. As he got there, Rans Nemo looked at him from the doorway, slicker than ever, and Rans said, "What you doing around here, Johnny? She didn't invite you to take her to church."

"I don't generally come where I ain't invited, Rans. What you doing here this time of day?"

"None of your damn business," Rans said.

"Ah-ah," Jeb Thompson clucked from the sitting room. "There's women present."

Just then, Polly Vance came out of a room at the back of the house. She was dressed in some flowery stuff, lighter than lace curtains. She smiled and said, "Good afternoon, boys. Are we ready?"

There wasn't anything else for Johnny to do. He held out his arm to her and she took his arm with her left hand and she took Rans Nemo's arm with her right hand and they walked out to the board walk and headed for the school house.

They sat just like that on a bench well up front in the school house. Reverend James Anderson came around, passing black-covered hymn books, and he said to Johnny, "Perhaps you three will be kind enough to use one book," and he smiled at them all, particularly Polly Vance.

The service started. There was a lot of singing, and Johnny could carry a tune pretty well. Old Mrs. Freelick played the little organ down front and Johnny sang out with all the voice he had. A couple of times, he felt Polly Vance looking at him as if she was proud of him.

But Rans wasn't outdone. He came close to making a noise on key and he could yell real loud.

Rev. Anderson beat the time with his finger from behind the teacher's desk up front and smiled to see such enthusiasm.

There was about thirty folks there, all told, from the town and the ranches around it. Matt Ballard sat over on the side and kept sneaking looks at Polly Vance and the two wild rannies on either side of her.

During the sermon, Rans kept glaring past Polly at Johnny. Every time, Johnny gave him a dirty look fit to knife him.

When it was all over, the young parson shook hands all around. He stood at the door, real friendly, and smiled, as he told the boys it was nice to see them at church and he hoped they'd come real often. To Polly he said, "I'm glad you liked the sermon, Miss Vance. Do come again." Polly said she would.

Walking home on either side of Polly, Rans and Johnny were about as pleasant to each other as a couple of he-wolves in mating season. They'd both grunt when she'd say something about the service.

When they got back to Jeb Thompson's place, down beyond the harness shop, Polly thanked them for their company and said good afternoon. There wasn't anything for the two to do but walk together back to the Empire Saloon.

They'd just got out of earshot of Jeb Thompson's house when Rans said, "You double-crossing, backbiting son, I ought to take you apart right here in the middle of the street for horning in on my date! She asked me, not you."

"Who you calling a liar?" Johnny said.

"I'm calling you a liar," Rans said. "You know damn well that you overheard I was going to take her to church and you come along just to be ornery as hell, like you usually are."

"I don't want no trouble with you, Rans," Johnny said, "but I ain't bein' called a liar by nobody. She did ask me to come with her. I danced the next-to-last dance with her last night, and she asked me. She said she'd like for me to take her to church at three and—"

"That's a damn lie if I ever heard one," Rans said. He kicked upon one of the swinging doors with his right foot. Johnny Brack smashed the other one back with his left fist. They walked up to the bar together and ordered.

"If any hombre asks me," Johnny said, "I figure it's you that's lying, Rans. I know damn well she asked me to take her to church. I ain't backing down an inch from that, and if you say she asked you—"

"Call me a liar," Rans said as he glared at his partner, "and it's the last thing me and you does together—except fight."

"Couldn't be no other way," Johnny said. He tossed off another drink. It was like coal oil on a bonfire. "I know I ain't a liar so you must be, because I never heard of a girl asking two men to go out with her at once. That's plumb crazy."

Rans eyes were slits. He spat out his words with venom in every syllable. His voice carried to every corner of the Empire Saloon. Some thirty men of Wild Horse County gathered in closer and stood as silent as at a funeral.

"Johnny Brack," he said slowly, "Tomorrow afternoon, school lets out at three. I ain't packing my guns now, on account of we been to church, but tomorrow I'll be going up to the school house, soon's school's out, and I'll be asking Miss Polly Vance to go to the Wednesday night social up at the school. If I see you there, or you get in my way, I'll kill you deader than hell." He poked a finger at Johnny

Brack and the room was drawn tight. "Keep the hell out of my way, Brack. I don't want no more to do with you."

Every eye in the room turned to tall, handsome Johnny. Men didn't breathe. They waited for Johnny to speak his death warrant.

Johnny Brack set down his glass on the bar and straightened. The last drink had put courage enough into him to say, "I'll be going up to see her myself for the same reason, Rans. We'll see who'll kill who."

Rans Nemo walked up the stairs to his room over the saloon. Men drifted around Johnny Brack. Ringo Ashley from the Bar Y said, "You must be crazy! Nobody in the county can outdraw or outshoot Rans Nemo."

The others hung on Johnny's words. Johnny said," We'll see," because he had a stomach full of bottled courage and he couldn't think of anything else.

He turned then, and walked up the stairs. He went into his little room down the hall and shut the door. He heard Rans come clumping out and down the hall. He stood back, peering out the window, and saw Rans, wearing his lightning pair of six-guns, mount his horse and ride down Main Street.

"You damn fool," Johnny Brack said to himself. "You damn, crazy fool. Maybe Polly asked both of us at that, so she could make us go to church. Maybe that was her way of seeing how we'd act in church, in case she wanted to pick one of us to marry."

His heart began pounding faster and with it he began to grow sober.

He sat down, holding his head, and looked at his six-guns on the chair beside the old dresser. He said, "Johnny Brack, you just done talked yourself into your grave."

He sat there staring at his guns until it got so dark he could hardly see them, then he got up, went to the restaurant and got a bowl of stew.

Jeff Kenyon was oldish, his thin face wrinkled like a prune. He leaned on the counter and talked low. "Took guts, Johnny," he said, "takin' on Rans thataway. But he's a mighty man with a pair of guns. I see him once—"

"Ever see me?" Johnny snorted and blew hard on his soup to keep his spoon hand from trembling. "I can throw a couple of guns, too, you know." Then he sat back and stared at himself in the little mirror beside the kerosene lamp. He said to himself, *"What in hell you saying, Brack? You're just making things worse."*

He went out of the restaurant and walked up the street, past Jeb Thompson's and back. His knees got so they didn't work well, coming back. He got up the stairs to his room, closed the door and dropped on the bed. The whole picture began coming to him in the dark. Him walking one way and Johnny walking the other, heading for the schoolhouse . . . nobody drawing until the second that one saw the other start reaching, then, in one swift move, there would be death for the loser.

Johnny Brack knew who that would be.

He lay there, scared and miserable, then he got up. The stars showed him his twin guns in their holsters, lying on the chair under the window.

"Damn guns," he said. "A man should be fast with 'em or throw 'em the hell out." He heaved them out the window.

It gave him a little satisfaction to hear them plop in the wet grass of the vacant lot outside the window.

He went back and lay down. Somehow, he managed to get some sleep.

THE sun was up when he awoke. He vaulted out of bed and to the window. The sun was pretty high—high enough so it didn't leave much shadow in the street. It wouldn't be near three, in that case.

He sat thinking about it all. The guns

were out. For a small hunk of change, he'd toss the whole thing over and tell Rans he could have the girl, but then he had to consider the principle of the thing, and his reputation in the town.

"Damn stubborn mulehead!" Johnny said. The more he thought about Rans making a monkey of him in public, when everybody knew he could lick anyone in a gun-throwing fight, the madder Johnny Brack got.

Little knots of folks were gathering up and down the main street as it got closer to three. When Johnny walked up the boardwalk to Jeff Kenyon's for a cup of coffee, about half past two, the town's eyes followed him in. Jeff leaned close and said, "You and Rans won't have no trouble from the Sheriff. This has been kept mighty secret from everybody. That is, nobody told their women about it."

"So the sheriff won't be around, eh Jeff?" Johnny said, and he tried to grin about it. "That'll be good."

"Sure," Jeff said, his face excited. "Sheriff'd likely stop it if he know'd it was coming off. Street fighting's against the law around here."

"Uh-huh," Johnny said.

"But we ain't had a good fight in this town in a year or more—since Bull Malone broke Rink Decker's back that morning in front of the Empire Saloon. That was a fight!" Jeff licked his lips. He lowered his voice. "Think you can lick him?"

"Sure going to try," Johnny said. He got up and went over to the saloon.

There he tossed off a drink real fast, because he needed a drink badly. He took the second one slow, sipping it and watching the clock. Dan Larkin, the barkeep, said, "I ain't seen Rans since yesterday. Your reckon you scared him away?" He laughed then, and the half dozen men along the bar laughed too. Because anybody would know that Rans Nemo wouldn't scare away, not a man that could handle a pair of guns like he could.

Johnny hitched up his pants and turned. He walked to the doors, swung them open.

Eyes fell on him. Rans was there, his guns hanging low, his hands ready for a quick draw. "Where's your guns, Brack?" he asked.

"I don't fight with guns so good," Johnny said, "but if you want to drill me from there, go ahead."

"Go get your guns," Rans said.

"You could shoot me just as well without 'em," Johnny said. "It wouldn't make any difference either way. Go ahead. Draw and shoot if you want to."

Buck Shard of the Lazy K said, "Take off your guns and fist-fight him, Rans."

"It's the only fair way," Matt Ballard said.

Buck Shard said, "I'll hold your guns."

Rans Nemo unbuckled his guns. He handed them to Ben. He turned, "I'll kill you with my bare hands then, Brack," he said.

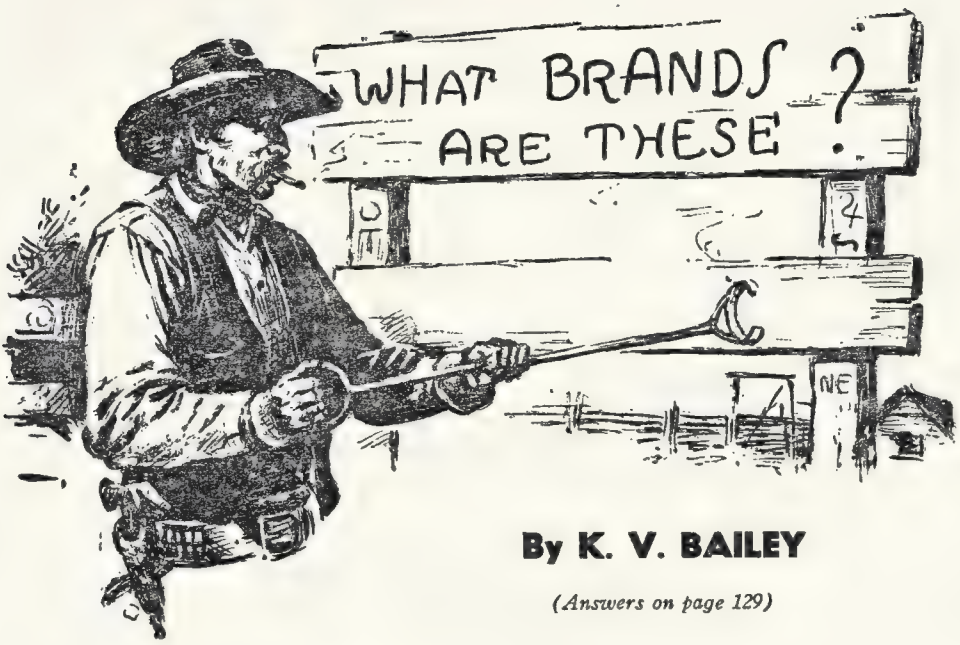
Suddenly, they were at each other, swinging wild and close. You could hear the smacking fists all the way down to the stray corral at the edge of town. A cloud of dust began to rise. Johnny caught Rans one in the jaw. Rans dropped to the dirt. Johnny jumped on him, and they rolled over and over in the dirt.

Rans gouged him and threw him off, got up again and kicked at him, but Johnny got away, came in again, and once more they slugged. The blood was beginning to flow and Johnny Brack was down on his side, groaning, when Rans jumped him.

Johnny caught Rans as he came down, and Rans screamed as Johnny twisted him. They fought on the ground, biting and kicking. The minutes dragged on toward a half hour, and the kids were let out of school and gathered around, trying to peek between the legs of the men who formed the circle.

Johnny got up and they went at it again.

Continued on page 127)

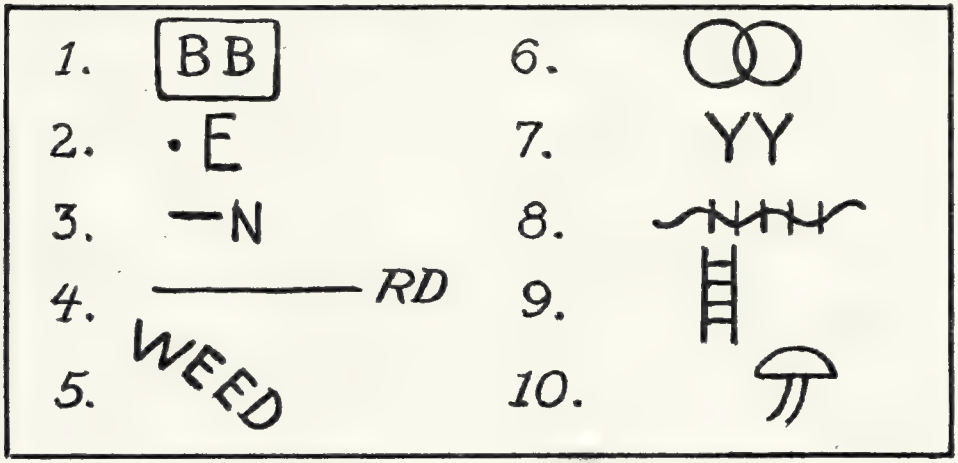


By K. V. BAILEY

(Answers on page 129)

NAMING a given cattle brand correctly is something that occasionally stumps even the oldest of old-time Westerners, for brands are often interpreted in a variety of unique and amusing ways. Brands, for instance, may be named after things they look like—the dog brand, the house brand, the tent brand, and so on. On the other hand, many brands are made up of combinations of letters or figures, as—678—the Six-Seven-Eight brand, for instance. In addition, brands may utilize a variety of symbols common only to brandology—rails, bars, slashes, and the like.

To see how much you know about brands, we've listed ten interesting brands below. Most of them have been used during the history of the West. See how many of them you can name correctly. If you can't call the turn on one immediately, use your imagination and try to guess what it is. Chances are you'll be right.



THE MAN THE GUNS FORGOT

By JAMES SHAFFER

CHAPTER ONE

Gunsteel Nerves

JAW HAWKER was lounging in his accustomed place in the corner, and the sight of the cold-faced, silent killer made his nerves draw bowstring tight.

Hawker was always there; always lounging in that same corner of Nass Darden's big, barn-like saloon and gambling hall. Hawker never played cards, he never danced with any of the girls, and he never drank. He just lounged—and waited.

Jackson took a deep breath, and his eyes shuttled around the saloon in quick, darting stabs. He was relieved when he didn't see Nass Darden. Then, conscious of the effort it took to do it, he walked to the bar with a slow, measured stride.

"Evening, marshal." Little Joe finished polishing a glass and moved to serve him. "Whiskey? Water chaser?"

He started to nod, then stopped himself. He desperately wanted a drink, and for that reason, he knew he shouldn't take one.

"Just the water, Joe," he said tonelessly.

He'd been at this business too long, he told himself. A man's nerve can only stand so much, and he ought to be smart enough to know when he'd reached his limit.

He'd told himself ten years ago, when he'd taken his first job of gun-whipping some law into a tough town, that when he

A law-forgotten town, a grave-forsaken gunslick—with one last bullet in his sixes to send one man to hell—and bring another back!

reached his limit, he'd quit. Now he was thirty-two, and the thought nagged at him that he'd reached his limit—before he'd taken this final job.

"Just water—plain water?" Little Joe asked in surprise.

"Just plain water," Jackson repeated firmly. He knew that once a man had to use whiskey to loosen up tight nerves, the end was swift. It was so easy to drink yourself into a feeling of false bravado.

"Going off the stuff, huh?" Little Joe

Buff came up holding his gun. . . .

rattled on. "Well, it ain't a bad idea. Me, I been pouring it for fifteen years, and still I don't know what it tastes like. Here's your water."

He picked it up and sipped it, his eyes swinging toward Jaw Hawker over in the corner. Jaw had ridden into town just a week ago. But he wasn't like the other gunmen Nass Darden had brought in.

The other killers Darden had brought in had gone about it in a direct manner. But Hawker had just taken up his spot in the corner of the big saloon and waited. And that waiting had done things to Buff Jackson's nerve this past week. It had stretched them to the breaking point, and he knew what that meant.

It was getting close to time for a showdown.

Buff swore softly and lifted the glass of water to his lips again. He thought of the reason he'd taken this job, and shook his head. A man can't fight against his fate. Not when his fate is tied up with a woman.

The doors of the saloon opened and a man came in. Water sloshed out of Buff's glass and onto his hand at the sight of the man. He rubbed his hand against his pants leg, eyeing the newcomer, and feeling his nerves draw tighter than before.

So Darden was bringing in another man. Doubling up on him. Because there was no mistaking the man in the doorway. Buff had never seen him, but he'd heard him described—and the description fit.

"Reminds a man of a snake—all the way through," the describer had declared. "Lean and skinny. and walks with a kinda stoop—like a rattler getting ready to coil. He don't turn his eyes to look, he turns his whole head—just like a snake. Got long, skinny arms that hang dang near to his knees. Yeah, you'll know Snake Lavern the minute you lay eyes on him."

It was the truth, Buff saw now. A man couldn't mistake Lavern for anything but what he actually was.

"Heard what beef's selling for these day?" a voice spoke at his shoulder. He whirled, and a grin cracked his taut features in spite of himself as he looked into Mary Mason's eyes.

"Gone sky high, I hear," he said banteringly. "A man could make a fortune raising the stuff."

It was sort of a joke between them. Mary Mason worked for Nass Darden, as a singer. He'd met her the first day he'd arrived in town and made his rounds of the various saloons. It had been afternoon and Darden's place was almost vacant. Mary had been practicing one of her songs, and he'd sat at a vacant table and listened. When it was over, his solitary applause had made her notice him and she'd come over.

"It's not that good," she'd told him sharply.

"Good enough," he'd said gravely, and then joined her in a laugh.

"Good enough to get me what I want," Mary had said. "A little place of my own with some cows. The way the price of beef has gone up—"

That had been the start of it. She had talked on about the little ranch she hoped to own, and he had let her finish. And when it came his turn to talk, he had told her of the little place he already owned.

"You mean you've got your place already? Then what're you doing here—wearing that thing?" "That thing" was his badge. "That's a target for every gunman on Nass Darden's payroll to shoot at. Why'd you take this job?"

He'd floundered around, trying to answer that question, until she had cut in. And her voice had lost the softness it had held when she spoke of the little ranch.

"You don't have to explain. I know the reason you took the job. Saw you walking down the street with her yesterday. Her dad—he's head of the Town Committee for Better Government. It'll be a feather in his cap if you root Nass

Darden out of this man's town."

He'd changed the subject quickly, getting it back to the little ranch they both dreamed of. And she had let it lay just like that, making a joke of the ranch and the price of beef.

"BUT A MAN can't do two jobs at once," Mary Mason said, jerking him back to the present. "He's got to make up his mind which job he's going to do."

"Finish one—then start the other," he said shortly, and turned his eyes once more toward Snake Lavern. He watched Snake closely, as the killer's eyes roved around the saloon. He saw Snake's eyes linger for a moment on Jaw Hawker, then travel on. Buff frowned. No sign of recognition passed between the two. No sign at all. Then he quit thinking, because Snake was moving toward the bar, and Buff's body was going tense again.

"Watch yourself," Mary Mason said quietly into his ear. "This is it."

"It's been it for a week," he answered tersely, and jerked his head toward Jaw Hawker.

He had seen the puzzled look in her eyes, but he had no time to wonder about it. Snake Lavern had bellied up to the bar beside him.

"This is Nass Darden's honky-tonk, ain't it?" he asked of Little Joe, and then went on before the bartender could reply. "Thought so. Tell 'im I'm here. Naw, I'll tell 'im, soon's I've had a drink. Some of the good stuff, the same as you serve Darden hisself."

Little Joe moved off and Snake dummed his fingers restlessly on the bar. He half turned and caught Buff looking at him.

"Two glasses, barkeep," he said loudly. "I don't like to drink by myself. You'll join me, huh stranger?"

"Sorry," Buff said quietly. "I'm drinking water."

"Water!" Snake jerked around fully, and his eyes fell on Buff's badge. For a moment his mouth worked soundlessly, then a gleam of cruel humor flashed in his eyes.

"A water-drinking town marshal!" he rasped. "And I'd heard this was a tough place."

"Even so, you may have heard correct," Buff told him. Snake laughed, then caught sight of Mary Mason standing just behind Buff. His lips bared in a wide grin as he shoved Buff to one side and reached out.

"Rather have a drink with you, anyhow, cutie," he chuckled, as his hand closed over Mary's arm. "C'mon, let's find a table."

"I'm a singer," Mary told him quickly, jerking her arm free. "I don't drink with the customers."

"Customer hell. I ain't a customer," Snake grunted. "I'm working for Darden, his right hand man. And you'll drink with me whenever I tell you to, savvy? C'mon!"

He reached out again, and Mary slapped him full across the face. Snake's breath wheezed in sharp and loud. He laughed, a high-pitched cackle of glee, as he moved forward again.

"Lay off, you fool," Buff said harshly, putting his hand on Snake's shoulder. Snake snarled at his touch and flung the hand off. His own hand kept coming and landed across Buff's mouth.

"That'll teach you to—"

He got no farther. Buff swung. He saw Snake through a red haze of hate, and all his one hundred and eighty pounds were behind that punch. His fist landed in Snake's belly, and he could feel it sink in. The gunman gagged, choking as he staggered backwards. The bar stopped him, and it was a second before he could gather himself. Then he flung forward, his fist lashing out for Buff's face. The marshal ducked easily under the punch and swung for Snake's face. The shock of the punch

ran clean to his elbow, and he saw Snake flying backwards.

The man hit the floor flat on his back, his breath whooshing out in a tortured gasp. Buff saw his gun fly out of the low-cut holster on his hip and go skidding through the sawdust for ten feet.

The killer gasped and rolled over, his hand clawing futilely at his empty holster. And something snapped inside Buff Jackson. With a hoarse curse he snatched for his own gun. He heard Mary Mason scream as he lifted the gun from leather, and swung its muzzle to center on Snake Lavern.

There was a roaring in Buff's head—a roaring that seemed to be yelling at him to kill. Plant a slug in Snake Lavern before the man could get to his feet; before he could reach his gun. Shoot. Riddle his body with lead slugs.

He squeezed the trigger. Something hit his arm, just as he heard the roar of his gun. Not until a full second later did he realize that Mary Mason had knocked his arm up, and that his bullet had plowed harmlessly into the ceiling.

There were only a few patrons in Darden's place at this early hour, but those present were held in a grip of silence as the echo of his shot batted back against the big walls of the place. Buff felt the roaring in his head die down a little, and he began to realize what had happened. He saw Snake Lavern scramble to his knees and start for his gun. Then Snake thought better of it, and slowly stood up. A door banged in the back part of the saloon. Buff turned, as Nass Darden catwalked in from his office.

The eerie silence still held, broken only by the soft footfalls of Darden in the damp sawdust. Buff looked at Snake Lavern. The killer was against the bar, his face white and pinched looking, staring at Buff. Over in the corner, Jaw Hawker hadn't moved. He was still lounging in his corner, doing nothing. He had made no move toward his gun when Buff had drawn his to shoot an unarmed man. There was a faint flicker of a smile on Hawker's face.

"Trouble, marshal?" Darden's silky voice cut through the silence like a knife. The silence fell apart then, and small sounds began to arise in the various parts of the saloon.

"Damn fool near gunned me—and me without a gun," Snake Lavern hissed. Snake's eyes narrowed and he studied Buff intently. "What kinda marshal is it that shoots down a man with no gun, huh?"

Darden's eyebrows lifted slightly. Darden was a good looking man—sleek and oily. He was as tall as Buff Jackson, but not as heavy. His clothes were faultless, his cheeks smooth-shaven and pink from soft living. Buff said nothing, but jammed his gun toward his holster. His hand was shaking, though, and the muzzle of his gun didn't hit the holster. He flushed and stabbed the gun in right.

Darden was smiling. He had seen Buff's hand trembling. "I thought you usually gave your opponents a break for their guns, marshal," Darden said quietly. "Changed your style of fighting?"

"I thought he was reaching for a hideout," Buff said slowly. "My shot was just to warn him." But his words lacked conviction, even to himself. And he knew that Darden didn't believe them.

Darden knew the truth, knew that his nerves were giving away—that it was only a matter of time until they broke down completely. But it wasn't Darden's way to admit the obvious. He was playing this game his way, Buff knew, and his way meant to continue to play cat and mouse with Buff. Outwardly, Darden accepted his story with a grave nod of his head.

He turned to Lavern. "What started this trouble?" he rapped out. Snake Lavern seemed surprised with the swift turn of events. He started to mumble something, and Mary Mason cut in ahead of him.

"He started pawing me," she told Darden. "If he's going to work for you, you'd better give him his orders to let me alone. You know I only sing for a living."

"That's right." Darden told Lavern. "You'd better come into my office—" He stopped suddenly at a sound from the street. They all turned to face it.

CHAPTER TWO

The Devil's Own Job

FOOTSTEPS sounded on the sidewalk out front, then a crowd of men surged through the doors. A tall man with flowing white hair and wearing a frock coat led the men.

Jonas Hepplewaite could have passed for a senator—he had the commanding figure, the grave face, and he knew how to talk.

"We heard shooting in here, Darden," Hepplewaite's voice was sonorous and commanding as he faced the saloon owner. "Our committee has warned you, Darden, this town won't stand for your vile presence any longer—"

"Save the speeches," Darden cut in sarcastically. "It was your marshal that did the shooting. Ask him what it was about."

"Nothing to get excited about, Jonas," Buff told him quickly. "No trouble."

Jonas Hepplewaite turned the full glare of his eyes on Buff. He stretched to his full, impressive height, before he spoke. "Jackson, the committee hired you to clean up this town. You've been here two weeks. You were told specifically that we wanted Darden's place closed and the owner run out of town. It seems to me that you've had plenty of time. What's holding you up?"

Anger began to beat within Buff. These fools! What did they know of cleaning a bad town up? They merely shelled money out of their pockets and hired a tough marshal. Then they sat back, safe and secure in their own homes, and waited for the job to be finished.

"You said nothing about Darden's place when you hired me," he told Hepplewaite, forcing himself to keep his voice low. "You told me you wanted the town cleaned up. You wanted an end to crooked gambling and other vice. I gave Darden his orders on that score at the time I took over the badge. So far, he's followed my orders. What more can I do?"

He shot a glance at Darden, as he framed that question, and he caught the grin on the man's face. Darden had played it smart all right. He'd followed Buff's orders to a T—while he hired gunmen to come into town and shoot the marshal down. As long as Buff lived, Darden would continue to obey his orders about crooked gambling. He would continue to obey, until he found a gunman fast enough to gun the marshal down.

"The town is getting impatient," Hepplewaite snorted. "The town is sick of—"

"Why not tell the truth?" Nass Darden asked quietly. "Why not tell these people that you want me out of the way so you can take over the town, Hepplewaite? Why not tell them that you're part owner of three other saloons in this town—and that your stinking committee and its hired marshal are just tools in your hands to fight me—because you haven't enough guts to fight me openly."

Darden was laughing when he finished, laughing sarcastically. Buff Jackson had listened to his speech with unbelieving ears. And yet he shouldn't have been too surprised. He'd heard rumors. But he'd shrugged them off as nothing more than that.

The big saloon seemed to catch its breath, waiting for Hepplewaite's next move. But the man made no move. His face turned crimson at Darden's words—then he fought his anger and checked it.

"I'd be a fool to even deny such a brazen charge," he said loudly. "Marshal,

you were hired to do a job. The committee expects you to earn your money."

He gathered his committee about him as an old hen gathers her young, and swept out of the saloon.

Darden chuckled. "Looks like you've got your work cut out for you, Marshal," he said. "Lavern, come on back to my office."

Buff stared at their backs as the two left, then turned and looked over at Jaw Hawker. The gunman was yawning. Buff swore and reached for the bottle of whiskey Little Joe had set out for Snake Lavern. He was pouring a big drink, when he felt Mary Mason's hand on his arm.

"Don't," she said. "I've been in tough towns, and I know what it means when a town-taming marshal starts to drink. You don't want that, Buff."

"Maybe you know what I do want," he said bleakly.

"Sure I do," she answered. "You want to quit. You've got to quit, Buff. A man can take it just so long. Then he quits—one way or another."

"That's putting it straight," he grinned. "He quits while he's still able to walk away, or he waits until they carry him away. Either way, he quits."

"You know it as well as I do."

He lifted the whiskey glass to his lips, then set it down without drinking any. His knuckles were white as he gripped the glass. "Quit?" he muttered. "Sure I wanted to quit. But a man can't always quit. Sometimes—sometimes, there's people that are depending on him."

"I know," Mary said. "You took the job because she asked you to. And because of her, you've closed your eyes to a lot of things that are going on in this town—and that were going on before you got here."

"Meaning," he asked, and the anger was rising in his voice, "that you believe those tales about Hepplewaite? That he wants Darden run out of town because Hepplewaite owns some of the other saloons, and Darden is ruining him?"

She shrugged. "Hepplewaite did own two saloons before the railroad built through here and made this a boom town."

"And Hepplewaite sold his saloons," Buff grated at her. "Sold out because he knew what the railroad would do to this town. And he's tried to keep it clean, staked his reputation on keeping this town clean."

Suddenly he realized how harsh his voice was, and how mad he'd gotten when Mary Mason had brought up the subject.

Now the girl shrugged her shoulders wearily. "Let's not argue about what Hepplewaite is doing or why," she said. "Let's just talk about you. You're tired—and you've got no business trying to finish this job."

"I never quit on a job yet."

"You will on this one—one way or another—like we mentioned," she said. Then she burst out, "You'd think you're the only town-taming marshal in the world. There are plenty of others."

The force of her words jarred his somber thoughts, and he smiled briefly. "You're right. There's plenty of men that would want this job. Young men in this business that want to make a rep for themselves. And taming this town will do the job."

"Then you'll quit?"

He didn't answer right away. His eyes, as always, had shifted around until they came to rest on Jaw Hawker. He tugged at a memory far back in his mind for a moment.

"You know," he mused aloud. "Jaw Hawker missed the best chance he'll ever have of putting a slug into me. When I pulled down on Snake Lavern, Hawker could have shot me and got away with it, 'cause I was shooting an unarmed man. But Jaw didn't even move during the whole ruckus. What do you think of that?"

"I don't know and I don't care," the girl said. "You didn't answer me."

"I'll bet," he went on, "that Darden gives Hawker hell for missing that chance."

"Darden?" she said. "Darden doesn't pay Jaw Hawker. He's not on Darden's payroll."

"He must be," Buff argued.

But the girl shook her head doggedly. "I don't know Darden's business—just what I see when I'm working, but I'd swear that Jaw Hawker isn't on Darden's payroll."

Buff shook his head in wonderment, mulling over that fact.

The girl wouldn't let him alone. "Are you going to quit?" she demanded.

"Quit? Oh, are you still talking about that?" He laughed and shoved the whiskey glass away. "We agreed that I'd quit one way or another, didn't we? I might as well quit the way I want—"

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. It was the young son of the Mexican woman that cooked for the Hepplewaites.

"Mees Shar-ron, she ees deesire you to come," the youngster said.

Sharon! He had forgotten her during his talk about quitting his job.

He nodded and gave the boy a quarter. "Tell her I'll be along," he muttered.

"If you go—you won't quit," Mary Mason told him.

"Say, what are you trying to do?" he demanded, and when she didn't answer, he flared angrily, "You keep out of this!"

But he was remembering as he strode into the street that it was Sharon Hepplewaite who had prevailed on him to take this job in the first place. He'd been preparing to leave the last town he'd tamed, and he'd gone down in the lobby of the hotel to give his guns away. Sharon had been down there, and a mutual acquaintance had seen both of them and introduced them.

He was remembering now the look of disappointment on her face when he'd told her that he was quitting his profession, and intended to settle down on the ranch he'd bought.

"Why, quitting now would almost be the act of a traitor," Sharon had told him in her throaty voice.

"Traitor?"

"A traitor to law and order," she'd explained. "You're one of the men that is bringing law and order to this wild country. You're still needed. If you quit, it would be the act of a traitor."

"A man isn't needed when he isn't sure of his ability to do the job. And I'm not sure of that any more. Better let some of the younger and more eager men try their hand at it."

That was the beginning. He'd had dinner with her that night, and he hadn't taken the night train out of town as he had planned. The next day he'd gone riding with her, and before he'd realized it, a week had passed, and his determination to quit his profession had wavered.

She'd spoken of the town she'd grown up in, a little cowtown farther west, where they were building the railroad. She told him how peaceful and quiet the town had been before the coming of the steel rails, and what a hellhole it had turned out to be once it became a shipping point for cattle.

"My father has organized a committee for better government. He's trying to keep the town clean, but he needs a fighting marshal. A man he can trust."

"There's plenty of them," he'd answered. "He won't have any trouble."

And then it had happened. He had found her in his arms, not quite knowing how she'd gotten there. And later, they'd ridden the same train west to this town, and her father had pinned the marshal's badge on his shirt.

The Hepplewaite house was big, and sat in a well-tended lot at the edge of town. He opened the gate and walked up

the gravel path to the big front door, wondering how best to tell Sharon of his decision.

She opened the door for him, and the sight of her sent the same old feeling coursing through his veins. His own boyhood and young manhood had been tough, and far from genteel. He'd never met a person like Sharon. She was soft, delicate and utterly feminine, and it had been a constant source of wonder to him how she could have fallen in love with him.

"You came. I knew you would. You're always so prompt." She slid an arm around his neck, drew his head down and kissed him full on the lips. He held her close for a moment, then pushed her away.

"Made up my mind about something," he said. "Something I've got to tell you."

"Let's hear it over a drink," she suggested. "Your favorite. Some of dad's bourbon."

He shook his head. He didn't want to go into the big living room and sink down in one of the big easy chairs. He was afraid he'd lose his nerve and tell her. He always lost his nerve to tell her anything when she brought a drink over to him and perched on the arm of his chair.

"I'm quitting, Sharon," he blurted. "taking the badge off—for good."

It was out, and he was glad. He stared down at her, seeing only the blurred outline of the pale oval of her face.

"But you promised." Her words were not an accusation. There was a hurt in them, like a child's who's been mistreated.

"Yes, I promised," he said savagely. "I promised because I thought my nerve would see me through the job. I thought I wasn't like the other men I've seen—the men whose nerves cracked on the job, who were buried with their badges on. But I'm like them, and I'm trying to be smart enough to see it."

She stiffened. "Who's been talking to you?" she demanded. "Has anyone—"

"Nobody had to tell me," he rasped back. "I know what's wrong with myself. I'm washed up with this job. I almost shot an unarmed man."

"The man you almost shot? He was a gunman, wasn't he? Would it have been so bad to have killed him, whether he had a gun or not?"

CHAPTER THREE

Backshoot Lead

HE STARED at her in shocked surprise. That a person as soft and as helpless looking as she could talk so coldly about the death of a man jarred him completely. Then he shook such thoughts out of his head. What did she know of the harsh life that pulsed along the streets of a boom town? She had been sheltered all her life by her father's wealth and power.

"You don't understand," he said gently. "If I'd shot that man, it would have turned me into a killer. The type of man that shoots at the slightest sound, whose nerves drive him to kill and keep on killing."

"I understand, I think."

"So I've got to quit before that happens to me," he said huskily. Then he put his arms around her and drew her close. "I'm leaving this town tonight. I'm going to the ranch I own. I want you to come with me—"

"You want me to leave father at a time like this?" she demanded.

"What difference does it make?" he asked. "Whether it's now or later on?"

She looked at him. "My father's very position in this town hinges on whether he can clean it up. He's been a leader here. When the town became wild, it was father that argued the other people into forming the committee. They look to him for leadership."

"Well, he's giving it to 'em."

"Yes, but father is looking to you for

help. Don't you see, if you run out on father, it will make him the laughing stock of town. It would—well, it would just break him. And I couldn't leave him at a time like that."

"I still don't understand—" he muttered, when she broke him off by slipping her arms around his neck.

He was silent for a long time, bitter thoughts rolling within him. He sighed heavily. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he said slowly. "I heard that Jake Kilgore is in Abilene. Not working. Just visiting in town. He could be here by tomorrow night, if your father wired him tonight. I'll stay until your father can get Kilgore on the job."

"I'll tell father," she said softly, and kissed him again. He snatched up his hat and hurried out the front door and down the steps.

It was just getting dark now. Kilgore couldn't get here until tomorrow about this time. Twenty-four hours. Not long, but it could be a lifetime, when you reckon time in the split seconds that it takes a bullet to travel.

He remembered the panic that had swept over him as he saw Snake Lavern trying to reach his gun.

He shuddered and turned back toward the house, knowing he couldn't stand another twenty-four hours of strain such as he had been through. Then he stopped. The window of the big living room was open, and he could hear Sharon and her father talking. A faint breeze ruffled the heavy drapes at the window, and he caught only snatches of what was said.

"—the fool—must convince him—must stay—" Jonas Hepplewaite's heavy voice rumbled to Buff's ears. He heard Sharon's soft voiced reply, trying to placate her father. But Hepplewaite wasn't placated.

"You must be sure," he muttered. "You've got to be sure—the whole plan—"

Buff Jackson jerked around, realizing that he was eavesdropping, a thing he had no right to do. Keeping off the gravel path, he hurried to the gate.

Were they talking about him? It sounded like it, but he couldn't be sure. And why had Hepplewhite used the word 'fool?' He shook his head to clear it. He had no right to jump at conclusions. He had no right to eavesdrop on their conversation. And then he wondered if he'd heard correctly.

That was it, he told himself. The words had been blurred by the distance. And in his jumpy state, he'd imagined he'd heard words that maybe he hadn't heard—words he had no real proof of. Then he remembered Sharon's soft arms around him, and he convinced himself that he had been wrong.

The town was getting ready for its nightly carousal as he walked back. He dropped into a restaurant and ate supper. Just this one last night, he thought and then he would be free. The biggest worry he'd have from now on was whether his fences were in good shape. And the only thing he'd use a gun for would be to shoot coyotes—the four-legged kind. He finished his supper and went to his hotel room, where he shaved and put on a clean shirt. From force of habit, he laid his two guns on the bureau and picked up his little bottle of oil and the cleaning rags.

Then he shrugged and tossed the rags aside. He'd have no use for guns tonight. No one knew he planned to leave town tomorrow, except the Hepplewhites. Tonight he would walk easy and steer clear of trouble.

He thought of Snake Lavern, and wondered if the cold-eyed killer would make his play tonight. Or rather if Nass Darden would order Lavern to make his play. The though made him cold all over, till he remembered Nass Darden's way of playing it.

Darden was playing a waiting game. Waiting to break his nerve down. Putting

silent pressure on him. No, he didn't think Darden was quite ready to make his play tonight.

HE MADE his first round early, leaving Darden's big saloon until last. As he came through the doors he saw Darden at the bar, surveying the growing crowd with a practiced eye. Snake Lavern stood beside Darden. Bluff let his eyes shuttle around. Yes. Jaw Hawker was in his accustomed place.

He walked jauntily toward the bar. "Milk, Little Joe," he sang out cheerily.

Nass Darden was eyeing him speculatively. Snake Lavern had stiffened at the sight of him, then relaxed at a quick glance from Darden.

"Got over the jitters you had this afternoon, haven't you marshal?" Darden asked carefully.

Buff nodded. "Feel fit as a fiddle," he chuckled as Little Joe slid a glass of milk toward him.

"Have fun," Darden said dryly, "and don't drink too much milk. It packs a wallop."

Buff grinned into his glass. Darden had sized him up to see if tonight was the time for a showdown, and Darden had decided that it wasn't.

"I'm surprised to see you in here, marshal," a man at his elbow said. Buff turned and saw Will Haversham, one of Hepplewaite's committee.

"Why wouldn't I be in here?" Buff demanded.

"I meant not quite so early," Haversham said quickly. "Later on, when—well—when you know what."

"When I know what?" he demanded, his eyes narrowing. "What are you talking about?"

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 87)

1. False. A "hitching bar" is a hitch rack.
2. True. A "hoe-dig" is a dance.
3. If a cowpuncher friend of yours told you he had been to a *"junta,"* he would mean he had just been to a meeting or council.
4. If a puncher referred to an animal as a "ball of hair," he would be talking about a very thin animal.
5. True. A "mealy nose" is an animal with dots around its face lighter in color than the rest of its body.
6. If a puncher told you he had just seen a *"mesteño,"* he would mean he had just seen a mustang.
7. The cook is sometimes known as the "old woman."
8. If a puncher referred to his "one-eyed helper," he would be talking about his six-gun.
9. True. "Ox-yokes" is a slang expression sometimes used in reference to stirrups.
10. A puncher is said to "pack his gun loose," when he is a bit too ready on the draw.
11. "Quirly" is the cowpoke slang term for cigarette.
12. If a cowpuncher told you he had seen a horse "rainbowing," this would mean the horse was bucking with his back bowed.
13. The term "ride like a deputy sheriff" means to ride fast as hell!
14. If the ranch boss set you to "riding bog," this would mean you would have to help free animals which had been mired down in bog holes.
15. "Sheffi" is still another slang expression for that much maligned, but still very much liked, individual—the cook.
16. False. A "show bucker" is a horse which looks as if it is very difficult to ride, but in reality is not. Such an animal is often used as an opener in rodeos. It is not generally used in later events however, when the competition among the men begins to tighten up.
17. If the ranch boss sent you out for some "splatter dabs," you should return with a plate of hot cakes.
18. False. A springer" is not an animal that is adept at jumping fences. It is a cow about to have a calf.
19. The western slang expression, "stretching the blanket," means telling lies.
20 False. A "sugar eater" is not a tenderfoot who has never ridden a horse. Rather, it is a horse which has been pampered.

"We better not talk here," Haversham said quickly. "But don't worry. Everything will go as planned." He finished his drink and hurried out before Buff could ask him anything.

He was still wondering when Mary Mason slid in beside him. "So you didn't quit," she said.

"I did. Tomorrow night."

"Buff, that'll be too late," she told him. "There's something going on in this town tonight. I—I don't know what—but something's up."

"What could be up?" he demanded.

"I don't know. But there's something. Buff, I don't trust Hepplewaite. He's using you for his own ends, and when he's through with you—" She broke off, seeing the black look on his face.

"Could you be jealous, Mary?"

He saw the flush creep into her cheeks. "You've got your own life to live. Live it as you wish. But Buff—be sure to live it!"

"I told you I'm quitting," he said. "And nothing is going to happen tonight."

"Then why are you being followed?"

"Followed? By one of Darden's men?"

"No, by one of Hepplewaite's committeemen. I was eating supper in the hotel dining room when you started your round. I saw the man following you. So I watched. One of Hepplewaite's committeemen has watched every move you've made tonight."

He shrugged. "Maybe Hepplewaite is worried about me." He tried to make it sound jocular.

"And maybe he's worried that you won't do the job he wants you to do—to break Nass Darden in this town."

"How could Hepplewaite force me to do that if I didn't want to?" he demanded.

"That's what worried me," the girl replied as she moved off. She went over by the piano and went into her song. Buff listened to the first stanza, then left. Her

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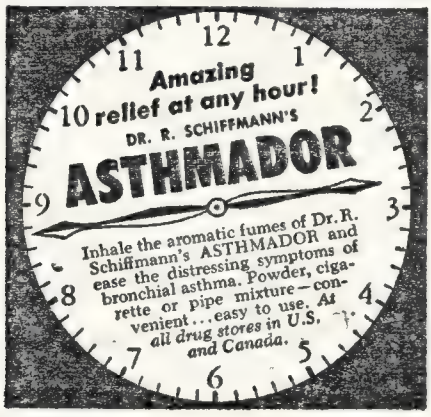

words bothered him for a while, but he shrugged them off as he made his rounds.

The town was quieter than usual. There was no cause for any alarm.

He usually made three rounds during the night. An early one, another one a little before midnight, and the last one in the small hours of morning. He was on the second round, and approaching Darden's place, when he remembered Haversham's words. About his not being supposed to be in Darden's that early. What did the man mean? Probably drunk, he thought, and stepped inside.

Almost immediately, Mary Mason came over. "Buff, get out of here."

"What's wrong?" His eyes shuttled around. Hawker was in his usual place. Snake Lavern was at the far end of the bar. Nass Darden was standing on the balcony that ran around two sides of the saloon.

"Hepplewaite has tricked you," the girl whispered. "He's forcing a showdown tonight—right now—"

"How could he force a showdo—"

His words chopped off as a man raced through the swinging doors. Buff placed him instantly. A two-bit gunman—one of the hangers-on around Darden.

"Nass!" the man yelled. "They're coming—the whole damn lot of 'em."

"Get out!" Mary shouted, trying to shove Buff. The noise in the saloon died away in waves. Nass Darden walked to the railing of the balcony.

"What're you talking about?" he snapped at the man.

"Hepplewaite and his gang," the man shouted. "They're coming to clean you out. They waited until the marshal was inside. That way you can't fort up—"

Buff swung his left arm. He caught Mary Mason across the chest and knocked her flat. His right hand dived downward, then came up with his gun. At the same time he was ripping to the right.

In the dim recesses of his mind, he was aware of the mad, wild scramble as the crowd in the saloon fought to get out. He heard glass shatter as men went through windows—the pound of boots as they raced out the doors.

Snake got the first shot in. It ripped through Buff's shirt. Snake first, he was thinking, then Darden—and finally Jaw Hawker. He lunged and the dive put the bar between him and Hawker.

Guns were blasting now. Lavern's, Darden's and two others. But the two others didn't worry him. It was Darden and Lavern. They were the killers. He hit the floor flat on his stomach and skidded on the sawdust. He heard Snake Lavern curse the moving target he made, then Snake's gun blasted. Buff felt the slug whip past his cheek.

His own gun thundered then. One shot. Two shots. Snake Lavern was staggering backwards, clutching his belly and screeching in pain. Guns were blasting from outside now, and the lights were going out, one by one.

He felt something hot rip along his leg, and realized that Nass Darden was shooting from the balcony. His other gun was in his fist now, and Buff tilted both guns upward. They blasted their double roar. He fired again, and saw Nass Darden stumble toward the balcony, try to catch himself, and then fall over it.

It wasn't until then that he remembered Jaw Hawker and realized that the man hadn't fired at him. Now he whirled, and saw Hawker coming across the bare floor, both guns pointed at him. A blast of gunfire ripped through, from outside, and the last light went out, plunging the big building into full darkness.

He fired at where Hawker had been, and Hawker's guns blazed at him from a different spot.

"Is he dead?" the voice came from outside the building. For a moment Buff was

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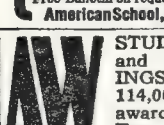

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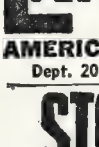

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stunned as he recognized Jonas Hepplewaite's voice. And more stunned when he heard the reply.

"He got the other two, boss. Now I'm taking him—" Jaw Hawker's voice.

And he had called Hepplewaite boss!

"Buff! Shoot him when I fire!" It was Mary Mason's voice. On the heels of it came the blast of a gun and, for a second, it lit up the big building like a flash of lightning. Buff saw Jaw Hawker stalking toward him and pulled both triggers. For a moment there was silence. Then a man moaned softly, and Buff caught the sound of him falling. The man moaned again.

Buff called softly. "Hawker? You hear me?"

"Yeah—I hear you."

"You were working for Hepplewaite all the time, weren't you?" Buff went on.

There was a horrible bubbling sound as the man drew his breath in. "Yeah—you was supposed to kill—Darden—and his gunman—then I'd get you—Hepplewaite would run the town—he'd own every saloon in—"

There was a commotion outside the building. It lasted only a minute.

Then a man said grimly: "Hold still, Hepplewaite—or by hell, you won't live long enough to git that tar and feathers we've got for you."

Buff got to his feet and started walking through the darkened building. He let both guns drop from his fingers as he walked. Suddenly he bumped into a small figure, and he slid his arms around it.

"Heard what beef's selling for these days?" he asked.

"Gone sky high," Mary Mason answered. "Man could make a fortune raising the stuff."

"It's a lie," he said. "Every cattleman I ever saw had patches on his britches."

"I like a man with patches on his pants. Especially if he's my husband—and I sewed 'em on."

SHOWDOWN STREET

(Continued from page 110)

Johnny landed one, and Rans went down. Johnny stood panting, his bare chest heaving.

Rans struggled up and aimed a vicious kick. Johnny reached out, caught the swinging foot and twisted. Rans spun and hit the dirt. Johnny got up. He yanked Rans to his feet.

They stood toe to toe, with their clothes torn half off them, and slugged it out. Rans caught a blow on the jaw and fell forward. He grabbed Johnny and they went down together, kicking and rolling.

Johnny got to his knees. He shook his head slowly and looked around, but he couldn't even see Rans, who was lying there beside him.

Rans was moving now. He got up on one knee, grabbed Dan Hardy's vest, pulled himself up and turned.

A woman's voice, shrill and blatant, cut through the dust-filled air. "This is disgraceful," she said. "The idea! Jeb, where are you? Jeb Thompson! Answer me! What's the idea you letting a thing like this go on for the school children to see?"

Jeb was hiding behind Matt Ballard and Ben Carter.

Libby Thompson pushed her way through. She got hold of Rans Nemo's ear and near pulled it off trying to raise him up out the dust. She got Johnny's arm and did better with him. Johnny could help a little. She said, "What on earth you two got to fight over, anyway?" Then she stared from one to the other and she said, "Say, you ain't fighting over Polly Vance, I hope."

She must have been able to tell from the way Johnny Brack looked as he got up. She yanked on Rans' ear again and this time Rans made it.

"Well, of all things!" Libby Thompson said. "What made you think you had any right to fight over Polly Vance?" Then Libby reconsidered. "You couldn't of

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known about it, of course. I didn't know about her myself until a few minutes ago, when I went up to her room and found the note. She and Reverend Anderson went to Rimrock right after breakfast this morning to get married."

Johnny wavered unsteadily. Rans hung on to Johnny. He said, "What you say, Miz Thompson?"

"Then I remembered when I read that note," Libby said. "It was Reverend Anderson that recommended Polly Vance for teaching here in the first place. They was apparently old friends. I guess seeing her in church with you two, and maybe hearing about her dancing with you two, the parson figured he'd better get busy."

Johnny took a deep breath. He said, "Well I'll be—"

"Ah-ah," Jeb Thompson said. "There's a woman here."

"Damn a woman," Johnny said. He turned slowly and looked at Rans. "Why the hell ain't you back working the claim, Rans?"

Rans spat a tooth and some blood. "Why ain't you?" he replied.

" 'Cause I'm a damn fool, I reckon," Johnny said. He had Rans by the arm. They pushed through the crowd and Rans said, "You figure you're a fool. Listen here. I'm a bigger damn fool any day than—"

"Shut up and lift your foot so I can get you in the saddle," Johnny said.

When they had been helped into their saddles, they turned up Main Street.

Rans wiped his bloody face on the back of his dusty arm. He said, "I never figured . . . you could fight . . . like that."

"Nor you either," Johnny said. "You got a kick like a mule."

"You got a right fist," Rans said, "like a forty-five slug."

They looked at each other and at the mud and blood drying on their faces. They both broke out laughing.

ON THE TRAIL

(Continued from page 8)

lasses industry there was starting, and long-handled utensils were much in demand. He named his own price.

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Donald Fenton,
Oil City, Fla.

With the saga of Timothy Dexter, the sucker who got a better-than-even break, our space runs out, and we must bring *On The Trail* to an end for this issue. We enjoy these palavers with you readers, so please keep the letters coming.

—THE EDITORS

ANSWERS TO THE CATTLE BRAND QUIZ

(Questions on page 111)

Answers

1. This brand is "Two Bees in a Box." Any symbols or figures with a "box" around them are likely to be termed as in a "box" by the cowpoke.

2. This the "Dottie" brand, perhaps thought up by a rancher who was in love with a girl named Dorothy.

3. This is the "Barn" brand. The short line before the "n" represents a "bar" in brand language. The "n" at the end finishes off the brand to make it the "barn" brand.

4. The long line is a rail, and the "RD" is an abbreviation for "road" in this brand. Thus we have the "Railroad" brand.

5. When letters or figures are tilted in a brand, they are often known as "tumbling." Thus, the thoughtful cattleman tilted this letter combination and came up with the "Tumbleweed" brand.

6. When two "O's" overlap each other, the cowpoke refers to them as 'lapped." Thus, we have the 'Lapped O's" or "Lapped Circles" brand.

7. Doubtless the originator of this brand had quite a sense of humor. No, it isn't the "Double Y." It's the "Too wise" brand.

8. This one's a tough one, and not likely to be guessed on casual observation. It's the "Snake in the grass" brand.

9. And to make up for the one above, here's an easy one. You've guessed it—it's the "Stepladder" brand.

10. Call it whichever you like. It's the "Toadstool," "Mushroom" or "Umbrella" brand. Maybe even the "Parasol" brand.

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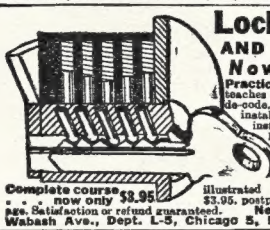

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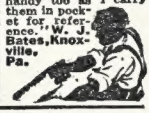

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